



Building New Pathways From the Humanities to Careers

AT A GLANCE

In the Humanities to Career initiative, JFF is evaluating efforts at the three community colleges to identify effective ways to help humanities and liberal arts students develop in-demand professional competencies and work experiences sought by employers.

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Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	4
A New Initiative to Raise the Profile of Liberal Arts Degrees	5
The Humanities to Career Initiative Today	7
A Closer Look at the Pilot Projects	9
Evaluating the Programs	10

Introduction

Over the past few years, education and workforce organizations have flooded the ether with this message to would-be community college students: “If you want a good job, get technical skills.” I’ve given that advice myself.

Despite the fact that many learners are attracted to the humanities and liberal arts, in our work with postsecondary systems and institutions, we’ve observed that community college students—particularly those from low-income backgrounds—are often advised to avoid those subjects in favor of STEM-related courses like information technology, health care, and engineering. The reason is clear: Unless students have had explicit career preparation and acquired recognized credentials, two-year associate’s degrees in the humanities and/or liberal arts (HLA) don’t offer much more labor market value than a high school diploma.¹

Recognizing that, most community colleges simply assume that HLA students will transfer to four-year programs; they don’t have a Plan B. And HLA majors make up a large group of the nearly 40% of associate degree earners who never complete four-year degrees.² Many of these students are people of color and/or individuals from low-income backgrounds, raising serious concerns about whether their degrees are the engines of equitable economic advancement they are intended to be.³

But this is the age of artificial intelligence (AI), and at Jobs for the Future (JFF), we believe that students should now be getting a different, perhaps counterintuitive, message about the value of HLA degrees. The message should be “It’s capacities nurtured in the humanities and liberal arts that are most important to employers in this new and evolving world of work. Tech skills are also nice to have.”

As employers embrace AI to automate and streamline time-consuming and labor-intensive tasks, they’re beginning to realize what AI can’t do. It can’t look people in the eye, read their body language, draw on intuition, or listen empathetically as a colleague explains a problem. These are the uniquely human capabilities that make for high functioning work environments, and they won’t be replaced by technology.

Not surprisingly, *communication* tops LinkedIn’s list of the most in-demand skills for professionals in 2024, and the professional networking site identifies *adaptability* as “the top skill of the moment.”⁴ Moreover, the World Economic Forum’s 2023 Future of Jobs report names cognitive skills such as analytical thinking and creativity as top priorities for employers but also emphasizes that it’s important to have “the skills that make us human,” such as “leadership skills . . . social influence, and the ability to work with other people.”⁵ And research by David Deming, an economist at the Harvard

Kennedy School, has shown that it's increasingly important for workers to have excellent social skills to go with their technical expertise.⁶ And there are many additional examples.

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A New Initiative to Raise the Profile of Liberal Arts Degrees

This brief describes an innovative effort to enhance the value of community college humanities and liberal arts majors and highlights the important contribution HLA studies can make to career preparation. Funded by the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Foundation, the initiative, known as Humanities to Career, is being piloted at three schools— Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) in Boston, Lorain County Community College (LCCC) in Ohio, and Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA). Those institutions are engaged in efforts to determine whether combinations of HLA coursework, a focus on development of professional skills, training that leads to a certification with labor market value, and on-the-job work experience can put liberal arts and humanities graduates at the front of the hiring queue rather than the end. JFF is supporting the colleges’ efforts and evaluating the implementation and outcomes of their programs.

The goal for the pilot phase of Humanities to Career is to breathe life into HLA programs by demonstrating that studying art, languages, literature, history, and the social sciences can prepare students for the job market by helping them develop the professional skills (also known as durable skills, employability skills, or human skills) that are key to success in all jobs in any line of work.⁷ Taught with an explicit focus on promoting the development of professional skills, HLA disciplines can help students become flexible, creative, and innovative problem-solvers, communicators, and team members as well as global citizens adept at navigating diversity—qualities highly valued in the labor market.

The one challenge this initiative faces is determining how to define professional skills, how to talk about them, and how workers and learners can demonstrate that they have them. Making progress on those fronts would represent an important contribution that would benefit recruiters, hiring managers, and job-seeking HLA students themselves.

This initiative, of course, isn't the first to point to a connection between in-demand professional skills and what one learns and reflects on in HLA coursework. College catalogues and course descriptions list outcomes of HLA studies using many of the same terms that employers use in job postings: *communication, critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving*, for example. But these types of skills are abstract and open to varying personal interpretations. In addition, there's no single, agreed-upon list of the specific capabilities included in the term *professional skills*; rather we have many overlapping ones.⁸ Thus, educators are in the same boat as employers in assessing whether students and jobseekers have these skills and can actually put them to work.

What we do know is that workplace experiences are a much more powerful way for students to practice professional skills than classroom instruction and activities can alone provide. Newer approaches to teaching professional skills in school include virtual reality experiences and online role-playing exercises—interesting innovations, but still not the real thing. The Humanities to Career project, in contrast, combines classroom instruction about professional or durable skills with work-based learning programs that offer real-world on-the-job experience. Work-based learning is a common element of many postsecondary earn-and-learn programs, but it's rarely included in HLA curricula.

An additional challenge that the initiative faces is that even if students can demonstrate through certifications, portfolios of past project work, or interviews that they have a set of sought-after employability skills, faculty and staff at the pilot colleges say that employers may not know exactly what skills they're seeking, often taking an "I'll know it when I see it" approach. This observation is validated by a recent Harvard Business School report which notes that while just over 50% of business leaders responding to a survey "were unable to assert that they knew which skills they were hiring for," many of the respondents were nonetheless "critical of the skills community college graduates possess."⁹

The results of other surveys of employers echo those concerns, which can be summed-up as "Young graduates aren't work-ready." According to a recent JFF report about the communication gap between employers and Generation Z workers, "survey data indicates that managers persistently believe Gen Z workers have failed to develop a sufficient 'work ethic' and must be taught workplace discipline to succeed."¹⁰ And a recent survey from *Intelligent* found that "38% of employers avoid hiring recent college graduates in favor of older employees."¹¹ _

The reasons for employer resistance to hiring recent graduates are unclear. Perhaps cartoonist Randy Glasbergen accurately captured the mentality of managers who find it challenging to work with a younger pool of more diverse job applicants. It may not be just because they're inexperienced. In a 1999 cartoon, he depicted a boss offering these instructions to a hiring manager: "We need to focus on diversity. Your goal is to hire people who look different, but think just like me."¹²

The Humanities to Career Initiative Today

The Humanities to Career initiative launched at the start of 2024. The three participating colleges have moved into the early stages of implementation, drawing on resources and programs already in place and inventing new ones.

The observations we shared above about the challenges involved in creating programs that help HLA students develop and demonstrate professional skills came from conversations we had during our first gathering as a learning community with representatives from the pilot sites. Below we offer brief overviews of each college's strategy.

In subsequent briefs and updates on the project, we will share observations about how the colleges are developing students' professional skills, as well as share specific initiatives, such as NOVA's design and rollout of badging and micro-credential programs, BHCC's expansion of its Ethnographies of Work program, and LCCC's efforts to encourage its many early college students to continue in HLA studies.

Finally, as the project matures, we will be sure to discuss progress in conversations with employers about valuing the capabilities and expertise of workers who are graduates of two-year liberal arts programs.

But first, to put the project in context, here's a look at the vision and strategies the Mandel Foundation presented to the colleges that were invited to apply to participate in the pilot in the winter of 2023.

Applicants were asked to show how they might do the following:

- Embed high-value business and professional credentials into HLA courses
- Incorporate lessons and activities that introduce students to the world of work into HLA coursework
- Add internships or other types of work-based learning experiences to HLA programs

- Design and facilitate faculty and staff professional development opportunities
- Partner with employers to increase the perceived value of professional skills and competencies that students build in HLA degree programs

All three grantees welcomed the goals enthusiastically. The opportunity enabled them to address a problem hiding in plain sight. Their HLA students fall into two categories, both at risk of poor labor market returns: HLA majors and those who never complete a career-oriented program and graduate with a “general education” degree. In many schools, these two groups make up 40% or more of community college graduates. And while some of these students transfer to four-year institutions, far more never attain a bachelor’s degree.

The message that leaders of the three community colleges participating in the pilot have for their colleagues at other institutions is this: While community colleges are and should be refining their workforce programming—making sure that their offerings in fields like health care, manufacturing tech, IT, and green jobs are up to date—they should also be touting humanities and liberal arts as valuable for all students. Additionally, despite the challenges of setting up internships and other earn-and-learn programs for HLA students, they should be offering HLA students the same kinds of career development opportunities they make available to those who major in subjects related to STEM and health care. The three colleges in the pilot each have strong career-oriented programs for their STEM and health care majors, and they’re adapting components of those programs for HLA majors.

One intriguing aspect of the pilot is that the three colleges operate in three quite different labor markets: the Boston metro area (with major employers in the biotechnology, health care, and education), Northern Virginia (aerospace, IT, defense, and government), and greater Cleveland (manufacturing, IT, and bio-health).

In addition, several other differences stand out, including the fact that the size and makeup of the three schools’ student bodies differ in several ways. For example, BHCC and Lorain each have around 9,000 students while NOVA has an enrollment of 51,000 across six campuses. People of color represent 84% of the student population at BHCC, 67% at NOVA, and 26% at LCCC. Full-time students account for less than 30% of the enrollment at all three colleges. And at BHCC, 55% of the students are enrolled exclusively online; at the other two institutions, that figure is about 30%.¹³

These differences will add complexity to the process of analyzing and evaluating data and outcomes, but they will also enrich our findings and conclusions.

“Educators are in the same boat as employers in assessing whether students and jobseekers have [professional] skills and can actually put them to work.”

A Closer Look at the Pilot Projects

Bunker Hill Community College: The phrase that best characterizes the BHCC approach is “career everywhere,” meaning students will experience career development touchpoints throughout the college experience, rather than only during orientation and when they’re close to completing their degrees. BHCC is redesigning its humanities and liberal arts pathways to integrate work-based learning and career-oriented skill-building and credentialing across the HLA curriculum.

The pilot takes advantage of work already underway at BHCC. Since 2019, all entering students enroll in a first-year humanities learning community that links several courses, one of which is Ethnographies of Work (EOW). This course critically examines the world of work through worksite observations, personal reflections, and career planning and exploration activities.¹⁴ Acting on feedback from members of an employer roundtable and insights offered by BHCC faculty and staff members at the start of the Humanities to Career project, the college plans to build a micro-credentialing program that will help students articulate the professional skills they acquire in the classroom when they begin looking for jobs.

In addition, BHCC has woven its Humanities to Career pilot project into a five-year Title V Career Pathways project. In the pathways project, which is now in its third year, BHCC is creating six guided pathways, each of which represents a broad vocational area or field of interest in which similar programs of study are grouped. Students are assigned a pathway coach when they enter BHCC, and nearly 9,000 students have selected a guided pathway since the program launched in the summer of 2022. A major challenge of HLA transformation in general is to create more opportunities for HLA students to participate in paid internships and other earn-and-learn experiences that reflect their interests and skills. The Humanities to Career pilot allows BHCC to focus greater attention on developing those kinds of opportunities.

Lorain County Community College: LCCC was the first college out of the gate in the Humanities to Career initiative. This past spring, the school enrolled a cohort of 30 students in an HLA co-curricular learning community that’s designed to foster an environment in which students have opportunities to explore careers, earn industry credentials, and prepare for internships. Some students have already begun internships. Another element of the program is training for faculty members to help them better understand the needs of the local labor market.

The HLA students will be encouraged to pair with their work toward their current majors with training from providers like the Google Career Certificates program that leads to credentials in specialties like graphic design and user experience and user interface design. The college is also offering students the option of documenting their skills and accomplishments in comprehensive learner records and portfolios.

A major goal is to increase the perceived value of professional and durable skills and competencies among local employers. Unlike the other two colleges, LCCC's focus is on HLA students who *will* transfer to four-year programs, but the intent is to ensure that they do so with a specific career plan and marketable workplace experience.

Northern Virginia Community College: Because Northern Virginia is located near the nation's capital, NOVA students have a vast number of industries to explore. The school's HLA majors are embedded in a division that includes 28 disciplines, a majority of which are humanities-based.

Educators in NOVA's Leveraging the Liberal Arts community launched the institution's Humanities to Career pilot by forming an advisory council to identify the specific career skills to emphasize through the project. In the spring of 2024, the advisory council asked local industry leaders for feedback about the types of durable and professional skills they're seeking in job applicants. Then NOVA established a program called the HLA Career and Learning Readiness Institute, which will offer workshops and lectures focusing on the skills industry leaders identified. NOVA is also developing a micro-credentialing program with accompanying project-based assignments and professional development activities to complement coursework that's being expanded to include real-world career preparation.

The capstone activity for HLA students is a "micro-internship"—a short-term paid work-based learning experience with a local employer organized and facilitated by NOVA partner Parker Dewey, an organization that works with colleges and employers across the country to create on-the-job learning programs in which students develop work-related skills as they prepare for the transition from college to career.¹⁵ Students will have support from advisors and faculty while participating in their micro-internships.

Evaluating the Programs

JFF is evaluating the implementation and outcomes of the pilot projects to determine how effective they are at nurturing and strengthening the durable and professional skills that employers value in combination with the other pilot components—particularly work experience and industry credentials. We're at the end of year one of our evaluation, and these four main research questions are driving our work:

1. How effective were each school's implementation strategies in meeting the intended goals of the initiative?
2. How did activities designed to enhance HLA coursework contribute to student outcomes?
3. In what ways are colleges preparing and positioning HLA students to succeed in the labor market?
4. What do faculty, administrators, employers, and students see as the value of HLA education?

We'll also be considering a number of additional questions, including these two, which are particularly relevant to the development of coursework and activities that prepare students for careers by helping them develop and demonstrate professional skills:

1. Are students able to clearly and effectively communicate their technical and professional skills to employers?
2. What did students gain from their work-based learning experiences in terms of skills, career preparation and knowledge, and access to mentors and broader professional networks?

We're optimistic that the three pilot projects that have been launched as part of this effort to reimagine liberal arts programs will identify new approaches to postsecondary education and career preparation that will not only put community college liberal arts and humanities students in better positions to land quality jobs and enter careers offering opportunities for economic advancement but also help employers to better understand and value the skills and expertise students gain in two-year programs.

Endnotes

¹ National Center for Education Statistics, *Report on the Condition of Education 2021*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2021), https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/2021/cta_508c.pdf; We use the terms humanities and liberal arts in this analysis. “Humanities” typically signifies a concentration in English, theatre, art, music, and the like. “Liberal arts” is used interchangeably by researchers and colleges with the terms “general education” or “associate’s degree” to mean a non-career credential in which the student takes a range of foundational courses in preparation for transferring to a four-year program. The two designations are frequently blurred in community college settings.

² High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL:09): A First Look at the 2021 Postsecondary Enrollment, Completion, and Financial Aid Outcomes of Fall 2009 Ninth-Graders; <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/index.asp?HasSearched=1&searchcat2=subjectindex&L1=339&L2=0>

³ Emma D. Cohen et al., *High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL:09): A First Look at the 2021 Postsecondary Enrollment, Completion, and Financial Aid Outcomes of Fall 2009 Ninth-Graders*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics at the Institute of Education Sciences, April 2024), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2024/2024022.pdf>.

⁴ Dan Brodnitz, “The Most In-Demand Skills for 2024,” LinkedIn, February 8, 2024, <https://www.linkedin.com/business/talent/blog/talent-strategy/linkedin-most-in-demand-hard-and-soft-skills>; Rachel Wells, “Communication Hits No.1 Spot as In-Demand Skill in 2024, Says LinkedIn,” *Forbes*, June 3, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rachelwells/2024/02/08/communication-hits-no1-spot-as-in-demand-skill-in-2024-says-linkedin/?sh=4a9c73aa75ce,%20https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/05/future-of-jobs-2023-skills/>

⁵ Victoria Masterson, “Future of Jobs: These Are the Most In-Demand Skills in 2023—and Beyond,” World Economic Forum, May 2, 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/05/future-of-jobs-2023-skills/>.

⁶ David Deming, “The Growing Importance of Social Skills in the Labor Market,” National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 21473, August 2015, revised June 2017,

<https://doi.org/10.3386/w21473>.

⁷ While we primarily use the term *professional skills* throughout this blog, we also like the term *durable skills*, which includes a broader range of skills and capabilities than the term professional skills is generally understood to encompass. These include growth mindset, fortitude, and metacognition—all of which are important character qualities that are even more difficult to define and assess than basic professional skills like communication, leadership, and problem-solving capabilities. See America Succeeds, *The High Demand for Durable Skills*, October 2021, <https://americasucceeds.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AmericaSucceeds-DurableSkills-NationalFactSheet-2021.pdf>.

⁸ Elisabeth D. Babcock, “New Strategies for Fishing: Coaching for Economic Mobility in the 21st Century” in *Minding Our Workforce*, ed. Brent Orrell (American Enterprise Institute, 2021), 176, <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Minding-our-Workforce.pdf>.

⁹ Joseph B. Fuller and Manjari Raman, *The Partnership Imperative: Community Colleges, Employers, and America’s Chronic Skills Gap* (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School, December 2022), <https://www.hbs.edu/managing-the-future-of-work/Documents/research/The%20Partnership%20Imperative%2012.12.2022.pdf>.

¹⁰ Molly Blankenship et al., *Turning Challenge Into Opportunity: A Corporate Blueprint for Navigating the Gen Z Workforce Transition* (Boston, Massachusetts: Jobs for the Future, April 2024), <https://www.jff.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Turning-Challenge-Into-Opportunity-A-Corporate-Blueprint-for-Navigating-the-Gen-Z-Workforce-Transition.pdf>.

¹¹ “Nearly 4 in 10 Employers Avoid Hiring Recent College Grads in Favor of Older Workers,” Intelligent.com, December 12, 2023, <https://www.intelligent.com/nearly-4-in-10-employers-avoid-hiring-recent-college-grads-in-favor-of-older-workers/>.

¹² To see the cartoon we cite, read the essay “Diverse Like Me” on The Inclusion Solution website: <https://theinclusionsolution.me/a-point-of-view-diverse-like-me/>. To learn more about Randy Glasbergen, visit the Glasbergen Cartoon Service (<https://www.glasbergen.com/biography/>) and his GoComics page (<https://www.gocomics.com/glasbergen-cartoons>).

¹³ Demographic data and other information about the student bodies at Bunker Hill and Northern Virginia community colleges comes from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>. Lorain County Community College supplied its data directly to JFF. Graduation rates are as of August 31, 2022. Enrollment statistics are as of the fall of 2022.

¹⁴ “Ethnographies of Work—About EoW,” a page on Bunker Hill Community College’s Digication online learning platform, accessed August 19, 2024, <https://bhcc.digication.com/ethnographies-of-work/about-eow>.

¹⁵ Parker Dewey—About Us, accessed August 19, 2024, <https://www.parkerdewey.com/about>.