

Liberal Arts Education: The Development of Inclusive and Transferable Vocational Skills

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## **Introduction**

This report and proposal, and the questions contained within, have been put together for the consideration of Florida State University's representatives to the Association of American Colleges & Universities ("Members," n.d.). As of this report's drafting, those representatives are identified as: President John Thrasher; Vice President for Faculty Development and Advancement Dr. Janet Kistner; Assistant Provost Dr. Joe O'Shea; Interim Dean of Graduate Studies Mark Riley; Dean of Undergraduate Studies Dr. Karen Laughlin; Assistant Director of Human Resources Ms. Renisha Gibbs; Vice President for Research Dr. Gary Ostrander; and Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs Dr. Sally McRorie. Any questions regarding this document can be sent to David Bateman-Schieler at dschieler@fsu.edu.

As the world braces for a period of economic downturn of unknown magnitude and length, higher education graduates across the country and around the globe may be considering altering their previously developed post-graduation career plans. Others, due to reductions in the labor market, may also be required to alter their plans ("Coronavirus quick poll," 2020). For some, these altered plans may fall outside their academic field of specialized education. Thankfully, Florida State University's dedication to "embracing a philosophy of learning strongly rooted in the traditions of the liberal arts" ("Mission and Vision," n.d.) will provide many with a foundation of universal and transferable skills (Knotts, 2002), necessary in times of low workforce mobility and high unemployment (Roth, 2014). Unfortunately, even with this institutional dedication, race and class likely continue to impact the meaning-making and level of participation in liberal studies due to histories and social structures of exclusion (Bourdieu, 1973) and an emphasis on/need for the immediate economic utility of education (Quadlin, 2017). It is here that I propose a contemporary institutional replication of the Quadlin (2017) study (which

made use of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1997 cohort dataset) or the Choy and Bradburn (2008) 10-year re-visitation of 1997 graduates (which made use of the 1992-1993 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study). A Florida State University study of the educational and career trajectories of racially and financially marginalized students could provide significant grounding for institutional policymaking and resource allocation that challenges those exclusive histories and structures and confronts the disbelief in long-term benefits provided by transferable skills taught in liberal studies. Additional effort to ensure the encouragement of racial and class-based equitable entrepreneurship could also inform University decision making.

As career placement prospects increase in uncertainty during this presently unfolding economic crisis, it will be important for Florida State University to use data-rich evidence to visibly signal to these marginalized populations the transferability of liberal studies and similar interdisciplinary programs, which form the basis of long-term economic utility (Knotts, 2002). However, it will be necessary that prior to this signaling, additional efforts be undertaken to reduce exclusionary symbolic pedagogical violence (Bourdieu, 1973) through an institutional recommitment to decolonizing all courses and expanding marginalized academic programming beyond the existing Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies, Latin American and Caribbean Studies, and African American Studies programs. This expansion should be led by scholars from the respective marginalized communities and should be done in a non-tokenized, non-commodified way (Talpade Mohanty, 1990). It is here that I propose Florida State University seek support for their expansion of liberal education by becoming a member of the Association of American Colleges & Universities' Liberal Education & America's Promise (LEAP) initiative.

## **Durkheim and Bourdieu go to college, Freire goes to University**

The sociology of education may serve as a space to help ground the proposals described in the introduction to this report. Chiefly, there are three sociological perspectives involved in education: functional, critical, and symbolic interactional. Earliest, Emile Durkheim (1961) suggested education served as a site of cultural transmission; “Education is above all a social means to a social end – the means by which a society guarantees its own survival. The teacher is society’s agent, the critical link in cultural transmission” (p. xiv). Important to this function is that the existing body of knowledge be transferred from one generation to the next. Functional formations of education have grown (such as vocationalism), and continue to grow, but at the root of Durkheim’s (1961) *Moral Education* was a student’s understanding of the world. Soon after, Pierre Bourdieu (1973) critically amended this cultural transmission, to highlight the purposeful exclusion of marginalized voices and cultures in education. Bourdieu’s naming of cultural capital helped bring attention to the inequitable educational structures which legitimized classical texts and arts and ignored the cultural products of marginalized populations. Bourdieu described the intentional exposure to nonrepresentative curricula as violence against marginalized populations. Ultimately, Bourdieu did not disagree with the function of education as a means to transmit and preserve culture, however he was highly critical about the intentional exclusion of some cultures.

Durkheim and Bourdieu live philosophically at Florida State University to this day. The University’s mission statement’s first word, outside of its own name, is ‘preserves’; “Florida State University preserves, expands, and disseminates knowledge...” (“Mission and Vision,” n.d.). Since gaining University status in 1947, Florida State University has also ‘expanded’ and ‘disseminated’ knowledge. This college-university differentiation is explored by Delbanco

(2012) in an argument that universities have stepped away from collegiate cultural transmission (inclusive or not) in pursuit of research funding and increasing career placement rates. And, while cultural transmission and preservation may be traits of colleges that have received critical attention, knowledge expansion and dissemination have also been critiqued. Paolo Freire (1970) argued that not only were marginalized cultures excluded from collegiate transmission, members of those cultural communities were excluded from the process of knowledge expansion and dissemination. This *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, provided a symbolic interactional approach to education which obligated universities to liberate pedagogical formats so that non-majoritized populations could authentically participate in knowledge creation. But a liberated pedagogy was only helpful in the expansion of compositional diversity in university settings and did not confront Bourdieu's concerns of curricular violence in collegiate settings. There is more conversation about these liberated university programs, later in this report.

### **Liberal Studies and Vocational Skills**

At the collegiate level, Florida State University has made considerable efforts to reduce curricular violence and increase the breadth of cultural representation. The liberal studies requirements include global and domestic diversity ('X' and 'Y') courses, many of which are focused on cultural products and experiences ("Liberal Studies," n.d.). However, the tacit regard of the liberal studies program by members of marginalized racial and financial classes may be more accurately evidenced by the rate of continued participation in liberal arts degrees than its explicit policies. The existence of disparities along racial and financial lines at this level (educational trajectory) would indicate to the AAC&U representatives for the University the potential need for consultation with the LEAP initiative.

That potentiality would be confirmed if the career trajectory of racially and financially marginalized graduates in applied studies fared worse during the present or recent economic crises than members of their same marginalized communities with non-applied (liberal/academic) degrees. Collecting data regarding the number of days spent unemployed during a set period of time, would be one such way to assess the comparative transportability/universality of degree-types.

The importance of a racial and class-based investigation into the transferability of liberal vocational skillsets during economic crises is significant given the intersectional history of race and class in the United States, and the necessity of economic participation for the maintenance of basic living needs. According to a 2015 report by DeNavas-Walt and Proctor the median household income in the United States in 2014 (at the end of the “Great Recession”) was \$53,657. Within that median income, Black households averaged \$35,398 while White (non-Hispanic) households averaged \$60,256. Similarly, almost three times as many Black individuals lived below the poverty than White individuals at that time.

### **Liberal Studies and Vocational Interdependence (of Choice)**

Such a proposed study of the racial and financial biases that may impact continued participation in liberal arts degree programs at Florida State University, and the racial and financial bias of the presumed vocational skills instilled by them, provides a solid foundation on which Florida State University can discover the sociological forces influencing the lives of its students post-graduation. However, a “dedication to the liberal arts tradition” and its benefits should not stop at this investigation. Florida State University’s vision to be “among the nation’s most entrepreneurial and innovative universities, transforming the lives of our students and shaping the future of our state and society...” (“Mission and Vision,” n.d.) requires liberal

studies not only be directed at the inclusive transmission of transferrable vocational skills, but also to the expansion of them. As a university, Florida State University must be as concerned with the placement rate of graduates into existing careers as they are with the rate of graduates creating new careers, with special attention to those already competing against forces of racism and classism in society at large.

This want for a racially inclusive entrepreneurial and liberal education has a long history, dating to the waning years of the Civil War (Gasman & McMickens, 2010). Notably, W.E.B Du Bois famously fought against Booker T. Washington for his 1895 oration and publication of the *Atlanta Compromise*, which Du Bois accused of overshadowing “the higher aims of life” (Du Bois, 1903/2002). Booker T. Washington, leading to the *Compromise*, was a champion for industrial and vocational arts as a technical means to economic participation for the Black man (tempered by late 19<sup>th</sup> century sexist ideals of femininity) following emancipation, such as the academic programs that became the cornerstone of agricultural and mechanical universities established by the Second Morrill Act of 1890. Du Bois believed, however, in a more inclusive re-envisioning of liberal education as sites of Black cultural transmission and as an adaptive means to economic liberation. Du Bois’ work with the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), their organizational work and membership, and institutional time has helped Du Bois’ vision for Black educational environments to come into fruition (Brown & Davis, 2001), but Black cultural-transmission at predominantly and historically White institutions remains a well published concern.

Over the course of his lifetime, Du Bois makes clear in a Black cultural context, what society is willing to accept by a myriad of White scholars in a normative context – that liberal education is the doorway to self-awareness. Du Bois’ White educational philosophical peer, John

Dewey (1916) rooted his book, *Democracy and Education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*, in this empirical situation of self in relation to others; “From a social standpoint, dependence denotes a power rather than a weakness; it involves interdependence” (p. 486). Du Bois’ disagreement with Washington’s *Compromise*, and likely disagreement with racially marginalized participation in contemporary applied studies, is the position of the Black individual in Dewey’s acknowledged relationships of power. Black students, as with any racially marginalized students, and ultimately all students, should develop an interdependence of choice, without vocational indebtedness. This becomes especially true in moments of economic crisis where workforce mobility is reduced by the elimination of available jobs. This is not a ‘pull yourself up by your boot-straps argument.’ Rather, it is an argument for an awareness of continued racial bias in employment practices, which continue to marginalize non-White applicants. Race-conscious institutions of higher education should be careful about the reproduction of vocational dependence of racially marginalized graduates, acknowledging their equitable duty to support career placement rates.

Where the solution to the culturally-inclusive transmission of vocational skillsets was determined by racially and financially marginalized participation rates in non-applied/liberal degree programs, and the length of time spent unemployed during an economic crisis compared to their applied degree program peers, measuring the reproduction of vocational dependence of racially marginalized graduates is arguably as easy if not easier – the response to inequities, however would be likely much more difficult. One such method of assessing dependence would be to determine the rate at which racially or financially marginalized student went on to establish their own careers through entrepreneurship compared to their White and upper-class peers. To this, the University could add a two-variable measure of supervisory racial incongruence and



perceived internal or economic pressure to accept any job offer received, for those marginalized students who did not establish their own enterprises also in comparison to White and upper-class peers.

If negative results were uncovered, Florida State University administrators may be compelled to return to Delbanco's (2012) differentiation of colleges and universities, Gasman and McMickens's (2010) histories of Black educational philosophies, Freire's (1970) call for educational agency, and Bourdieu's (1973) democratization of cultural capital, to find the answer. Here I suggest that the complex answer may be the establishment and preservation of racially and financially marginalized sites of free (in the unrestricted sense) ontological inquiry, whether directed at liberal entrepreneurship (perhaps through the implementation of a socially critical vocational pedagogy, see Peach, 2010) or the academic investigation of non-vocational marginalized studies (perhaps through an expansion of the existing "liberated" programs: Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies, Latin American and Caribbean Studies, and African American Studies programs). Freedom from vocational dependence through liberal studies for marginalized populations is possible when inclusive collegiate cultural transmission gives way to intrapersonal/intracommunal, non-tokenized, non-commodified, academic inquiry into existing community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Marginalized graduate dependence is not the result of a skillset deficiency of the graduates. Rather, it is more likely the result of inauthentic skillsets being violently banked into graduates by academic institutions who themselves are deficient in a more culturally broad set of skills and without the academic sites of free inquiry to discover them.

## **Studies in Summary**

This report contains in it the proposal of three studies, intended to uncover potentially racist and classist structures impacting students' educational trajectories and graduates' career mobility and dependence. First, are there patterns to the racial and financial participation of students in non-applied/non-STEM "liberal" degree programs beyond the required liberal studies program at Florida State University? Second, do similarly situated marginalized Florida State University graduate populations experience differences in the length of unemployment during periods of economic downturn/crisis when compared to non-applied "liberal" degree holders with applied/vocationally-driven degrees? And third, do marginalized Florida State University graduates establish their own careers at comparable rates to their non-marginalized counterparts, or experience perceived difference in pressure to accept subordinate employment opportunities to racially or financially majoritized supervisors?

A hypothesis for each of these studies is given, principally driven by historic philosophical arguments and an awareness of persistent oppressive social systems. Recommendations for intervention are also broadly outlined, dependent on the results of the proposed studies.

## **Conclusion**

Chunoo and Osteen (2016) ask us to pay attention to how colleges and universities enact their institutional mission statement. Gasman and McMickens (2010) qualify the history of culturally relevant missions with attention to Black educational philosophies. For Florida State University this mission statement praises the collegiate and university formats of cultural preservation, transmission, expansion, and dissemination. It also praises epistemic skill-building, diversity and inclusion, personal responsibility, and sustainability. The University's vision statement extends

this mission into “entrepreneurship, interdisciplinarity, and diversity” (“Mission and Vision,” n.d.).

Ultimately, Florida State University has an equitable duty to students and graduates, ensuring that they receive the necessary tools to self-determine in a manner that is responsible, sustainable, and of public benefit. This report, directed to the University’s Association of American Colleges & Universities representatives, outlines a series of steps to ensure that equitable duty is being carried out with regard to racially and financially vulnerable populations, given the increased uncertainty of the presently unfolding economic crisis. The direction of this report is particularly relevant, given the potentially most impactful recommendation – to join the Liberal Education & America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative.

According to the AAC&U, “(LEAP) is a national public advocacy and campus action initiative. LEAP champions the importance of a liberal education – for individual students and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality” (“LEAP Initiative,” n.d.). The time to join LEAP is ripe given the rapidly changing nature of workforce competition and the expectation of employers that applicants (Florida State University graduates) have liberal vocational skillsets that can address adaptive and interdisciplinary business problems (Humphreys & Carnevale, 2016). While many of the identified LEAP outcomes (Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and nature world; Intellectual and practical skills; Personal and social responsibility; and Integrative and applied learning) are already practiced and valued at Florida State University, the visible signaling of the economic utility of those outcomes to marginalized graduates may be less apparent. As a preeminent Florida public university, and as a rising national public university (US News & World Report, 2020), Florida State University

must turn its attention to key areas for improvement, giving equitable attention to vulnerable populations.

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