The Employability Curriculum
A Roadmap for Creating Global Professionals
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Executive Summary

The world economy is in significant transition. Colleges and universities are searching for the best ways to evolve and meet the traditional obligations of teaching, research and service. Students as well as governmental and business leaders are looking to leverage higher education to achieve career and economic success. Taking into consideration these and other factors, the purpose of this report is to develop the foundation of an Employability Curriculum intended to position University of Kansas students for success in the global workforce and contribute to a strong American economy. The three sections of this report cover the following topics:

1. Providing a definition of employability and explicating its relevance for today
2. Outlining an Employability Curriculum dimensions and practice
3. Discussing potential outcomes for students, academic departments, and the University of Kansas

Key findings:

Employability combines both academics and vocation: employability is contingent upon a strong academic program. The skills and abilities gained in one’s academic program are critical to maximizing employability. The Employability Curriculum seeks to connect the university to the workplace in a meaningful way that is mutually beneficial, rather than reinforce a division between the two.

Employability is a process: rather than a discrete program or class, employability matters at all levels of a university and is relevant to all stages of student development. Through a reflective, developmental process, students learn to become adaptive, desirable professionals who are well suited for a global economy. Academics, career development programs, and experiential learning all play a part in a successful Employability Curriculum.

Maximize student preparedness: student, employer, and public opinion reports find that there are significant concerns about graduates’ ability to land suitable employment and create a sustainable, robust career. Recent debates over the value of a college degree seem to reinforce changing expectations about what a college degree should do for a student. In light of these concerns, the Employability Curriculum seeks to increase student preparedness by focusing on both breadth and depth: developing skills that are adaptable to different contexts, as well as expertise in a particular skill set or discipline.

Many students are motivated by career: Societal expectations about higher education have changed over the past few decades—many students attend college to “get a good job,” and improve their earning potential. A degree is no longer an end unto itself for many students, but is chiefly a means to an end. As such, employability is a sustainability issue for KU. Adapting services and programs to address these expectations and attitudes would help to attract students who have come to equate an education with employment.

Ultimately, this report is a roadmap for generating a successful program that will help KU graduates to be more successful in creating lifelong careers. This report highlights the critical factors that influence students’ decisions to attend college, their academic choices, and their relationship to work after graduation. As research demonstrates, an Employability Curriculum is one of the best options available for helping students to make decisions before graduation that will enhance their abilities as professionals in a global workforce.

* Some sources in this study use “employability” to refer to the outcomes of an employability curriculum, while other sources use “employability” to refer to the process undertaken to achieve particular outcomes. Within this study, “Employability Curriculum” specifically refers to the process and programs designed to produce particular outcomes in students.
Section I—Employability: Definition and Relevance

This section explores the definition of employability through academic research, findings on employer demands, and reports on workplace changes. Employability is a concept that is chiefly defined as an ability to thrive in a dynamic and increasingly uncertain workforce. Employability seeks to foster both breadth and depth in an individual’s abilities. It strives to foster depth through expertise in a particular area; for example, a student majoring in either geology or Spanish will develop knowledge relating to those particular disciplines. Employability also emphasizes breadth by strengthening competencies related to communication, abstract thinking, and emotional intelligence, so that a student majoring in either geology or Spanish (for example) can adapt their respective areas of expertise into multiple contexts, industries, or workplaces.

Key concept: Employability is a process by which students develop into highly sought-after professionals who possess both depth (expertise in a particular discipline/skill) and breadth (a broad range of skills applicable to many different contexts). Additionally, employability would enable KU to respond to political critiques of higher education, seismic shifts in the global economy, and changing student needs.

Questions addressed:

• What does employability mean, both conceptually and relationally?
• Why is employability relevant to KU?
• What are the political, economic, and social realities pertinent to employability?

What is employability?

Chiefly, “employability” means the fitness of an individual to find suitable work by possessing both expert proficiency in a discipline or field, while also having the intelligence to apply that expertise to a wide range of contexts, communicate well, and adapt to new information. Rather than default to only one set definition of employability, it is more helpful to explore this concept through a thick description, incorporating several different sources to develop a detailed picture of what this concept means. Whether discussing “highly human skills,” a “T-shaped” professional, or the outcomes of a liberal education, all contribute to an understanding of what employability looks like today and what it means for KU.

Definition of Employability

In the broadest sense, employability is a gestalt, rather than a set checklist of desirable skills and abilities. Yorke and Mantz (2004) defined it as “practical intelligence” which “is related to specific and contexted knowledge which is often tacit and resistant to capture” (p. 31). In other words, it is difficult to objectively measure something like “practical intelligence” because it is an intuitive quality that cannot be tested in the same way that, for example, math abilities are measured. Feller and Whichard (2005), in discussing “knowledge nomads,” argued, “successful workers are those who are able to identify and solve problems by manipulating images,” “grasp ideas and ponder their possibilities without the constraints of logical or emotional judgments,” and can use “all available tools—technology and experiential—to create options and solve problems” (p. 48-49). This description speaks to the “practical intelligence” and high degree of creativity implicit in a definition of employability.
Employability refers to a person who is “capable of re-organizing existing knowledge in new and unexpected combinations of seeing the relative merits of opposing or contesting arguments, or by an understanding of the deep complexity of language itself in many different forms, historical or contemporary” (Knight & Mantz, 2004, p. 71). For proponents of the liberal arts and sciences it becomes obvious that the objectives of employability are consistent with the intended outcomes of a liberal education. Zakaria (2014) outlined in a recent article the advantages of a liberal education, all of which are congruent with the outcomes of employability. As he stated, one advantage of a liberal education “is that it teaches you how to speak and speak your mind,” in that it educates students “on the process of thinking through the subject matter and presenting [your] analysis and conclusions – out loud” (Zakaria, 2014, para. 9). In other words, what a student learns in college can quickly become irrelevant in light of rapid technological development. However, knowing how to learn is crucial to a liberal education and also to employability (Zakaria, 2014).

While employability speaks clearly to the objectives of a liberal education (and will be explored further later in this report), others have also explored the outcomes of employability. Samson (2013) conceptualized employability as “highly human skills,” which included “basic thinking skills and symbolism,” “conscious monitoring and control,” “hypothesizing,” “creativity and imagination,” “subjective decision making,” “social skills,” and “responsibility” (p. 33-35). These skills denote an individual capable of conscious decision-making and reflection, while also responsive to others. Also, these are skills that cannot be overtaken as technology advances.

Employability is not an exclusively academic concept, but is also found within the business world. Professionals within the workplace echo the elements of “highly human skills” with “professionalism.” A survey of HR executives and managers on professionalism reported that 96% believed “professionalism relates to the person, not the job title.” These same professionals reported that “professionalism” consists of qualities that also overlap with employability. As reported, the top characteristics of professionalism entailed interpersonal skills, self-discipline, communication skills, and work ethic. Interestingly, only 9% of HR executives and managers said professionalism related to knowledge. Again, this indicates a need for individuals who are more than an “expert” in a given discipline or proficiency, but are a total package of both technical knowledge and personal intelligence (“Professionalism in the Workplace,” 2012).

As mentioned in the executive summary, students should develop breadth and depth during their collegiate career. As a result, a discussion of “T-shaped” professionals is also useful toward developing a definition of employability. Primarily, “T-shaped” professionals “combine the benefits of deep problem-solving skills in one area, with broad complex-communication skills across many areas.” This concept, first developed with firms like IBM and IDEO Design, offers a conceptual model for employability, in that it represents both the depth and breadth that is necessary for successful employees in today’s workplace. With a “principle skill” that stands for a deep knowledge in a particular discipline or skill, “T-shaped” professionals also have breadth, in that they are still “able to explore insights from many different perspectives and recognize patterns of behavior that point to a universal human need” (Donofrio, Spohrer, & Zadeh, 2010). Rather than developing individuals with a solitary area of expertise, professionals who are “T-shaped” may have a greater rate of success in a rapidly changing workplace (Donofrio, Spohrer, & Zadeh, 2010).
As Donofrio, Spohrer, and Zadeh (2010) reported, the need for people who can quickly adapt and interpret information is critical for a high-tech workplace. “As the planet gets smarter,” they observed, “multiple strands of empirical evidence support the need for T-shaped people with deep problem solving skills in one area...and better complex communications skills across many areas” (Donofrio, Spohrer, & Zadeh, 2010). The demand for “T-shaped” professionals stands to grow, as an article from Brooks (2012) stated, “the most sought-after candidates for management, consulting, research, and other leadership positions are T-shaped.”

**Employability as a connection between university and the marketplace**

It is worth discussing an additional dimension to employability, in that it articulates a positive relationship between the university and the marketplace. As mentioned in the executive summary, employability is unique in its ability to marry academics to vocation in a meaningful way. To be sure, KU actively fosters multiple means of engagement for students who are looking to make the transition to the workplace. However, the traditional divide between the “ivory tower” and the “real world” is a distinction that both teachers and students still explicitly enforce. Particularly when there are concerns about students making the transition from student to professional, faculty may perceive those concerns as something that belongs outside the classroom. As Knight and Yorke (2004) noted in their research of UK universities, “higher education teachers interpret [employability] as an intrusion on the proper concerns of academic life” (p. 1). Their findings indicate that for some, academics are a distinct realm, one apart from the world of business. While this may not apply wholesale to KU, these attitudes point to a symbolic divide that may be reinforced by both by faculty and students who do not see a clear connection between academics and vocation.

And yet, employability is very much a concern of the classroom, and consistently “aligns with a concern for academic values and the promotion of good learning” (Knight & Yorke, 2004, p. 1). Besides the qualities that constitute employability, employability is a new way to bridge the gap between academics and the workforce constructively, without denigrating the integrity of academics, or disparaging the reality that most students are going to find employment opportunities beyond the academy. As Knight and Yorke (2004) stated, “employability means then, taking seriously many of the long-established goals of higher education and devising arrangements likely to help most students to make stronger, convincing claims to achievement in respect to them” (p. 2). They go on to argue that employability is compatible with the traditional academic values. While there is potential for resistance to this, in terms of it appearing as though employability initiatives are kowtowing to corporate demands to produce suitable workers, but that is not the case—employability is congruent with the aims of a liberal arts education (Knight & Yorke, 2004, p. 21).

It is urgent that the divide between the workplace and employability be addressed effectively, because it is evident that efforts in higher education are falling short of student needs. Currently, research points to a discrepancy between university administrators’ and students’ expectations on employability. Recent findings showed that “96% of chief academic officers at higher education institutions say their institution is ‘very or somewhat’ effective at preparing students for the world of work” (Busteed, 2014). This finding seems to be at odds with research indicating that U.S. business leaders and the American public have a very different opinion of higher education’s ability to prepare students for the workplace. Gallup found that “14% of Americans strongly agree that college graduates are well-prepared for success in the workplace,” whereas “barely one in 10 (11%) business leaders strongly agree that college graduates have the skills and competencies that their workplaces need” (Busteed, 2014).
Through employability, KU can address the gap between preparedness at the college level and workplace or entrepreneurship readiness. In effect, employability represents both a new kind of professional and a new way to frame KU’s relationship to the professional world. Conceptually, employability speaks to the fitness of an individual to find suitable work by possessing both expert proficiency in a discipline or field, while also having the intelligence to apply that expertise to a wide range of contexts, as well as the ability to communicate well and adapt to new information. Relationally, employability seeks to strengthen the relationship between the university and professional world. The concerns of both academics and the workforce can find consensus in employability.

**Employability’s relevance to KU—political, economic, and social realities**

Developing students to be adaptable, intelligent, and capable professionals has perhaps never been more relevant to KU. Political critiques, economic trends, and social developments all indicate that there is an important shift happening—more and more, universities and colleges must defend the value of a higher education, and KU is by no means exempt from those challenges. This section explores why employability matters to KU, given certain political, economic, and social conditions evident today.

Most prominently, the political debate over a college education serves as the primary impetus to a discussion of employability. In short, college education is under review—given high debt, low graduation rates, and seemingly gloomy employment prospects, why should a student go to college?

Primarily, two official government responses attempt to answer this question. The White House’s College Scorecard, first announced in President Obama’s 2013 State of the Union address, will collect data from colleges and universities relating to student debt, employment rates, graduation rates, and cost. Moreover, Senator Ron Wyden’s “The Student Right to Know Before You Go” Act calls for colleges and universities to collect additional data, which makes it evident that there is a serious demand for accountability. As Senator Ron Wyden argued, students “deserve to know this information before they invest thousands of dollars and years of their lives.” The number one priority of this law is that students and their families should know “post-graduation average annual earnings” (Wyden, n.d.). Both acts represent an important shift away from acceptance and graduation rates to post-graduate outcomes. A degree in and of itself no longer has the same signaling power it had in previous years. Instead, the outcome of the degree is now the primary concern for both government officials and individuals.

These bold political initiatives are chiefly a response to a massive, if not nearly catastrophic, change in the economic landscape of the early 21st century. The 2008 recession still looms large for recent college graduates; all but a secure few seem well aware of the challenges in getting a good job. Now in the midst of a slow, but steady recovery, graduates and students are faced with a seeming paradox: employment prospects are simultaneously scarce and abundant.

To be sure, there is a plethora of evidence pointing to poor employment prospects for recent college graduates. As the “Education to Employment report stated, 45% of students surveyed reported that it took three months to over a year after graduation to find a job” (Mourseshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2013, p. 45). Even when a student finds a job, it is not necessarily a fit for the student financially or educationally, as the “U.S. Department of Labor tells us nearly half of working college graduates are ‘underemployed,’” usually indicative of jobs that are only part-
time and/or low-wage (“The PreparedU Project, 2014, p. 3). Additionally, Columbia University economist Joseph Stiglitz (2012) grimly reported, “there are 6.6 million fewer jobs in the United States than there were four years ago. Some 23 million Americans who would like to work full-time cannot get a job” (para. 1). Even though economic indicators do point to some slow progress since then, worldwide prospects for the young seem especially dire, as “global rates of unemployment for young people in developed countries is around 18.3%” (“Global Employment Trends 2014,” 2014, p. 36).

Additionally, these depressed figures for employment are indicative of another trend. Recent findings indicate that newly employed individuals are likely to be engaged in interim work and/or work that is a poor match to their abilities and skills. Mourshed, Farrell, and Barton (2013) noted, “among working youth, only 55% landed in a job relevant to their field of study, with 25% finding interim work—jobs that are unrelated to their field of study and that youth plan to leave quickly” (p. 45). This finding bears out in other sources, like in Blumenstyk’s (2014) article, which found that the “average tenure in a first job for a typical twenty-something is now about 18 months.” While one might argue that for many liberal arts degrees, subsequent employment may often be considered “unrelated” to a major, these findings still indicate that new graduates are struggling to find work that is a good match for their expertise and abilities.

Most students and recent graduates express anxiety when it comes to finding suitable employment. Yet, in spite of all the bad news, it seems that there is just as much cause for optimism. The report “Recovery 2020” (2013) issued by the Georgetown Public Policy Institute, stated that “there will be 55 million job openings in the economy through 2020” (p. 1). As incredible as it seems, additional evidence seems to support that bright forecast. Each month, stated Carnevale, Jayasundera, and Repnikov (2014), there are 3.7 million job openings, 80% of which are jobs targeting those with a Bachelor’s degree or more (p. 1). The article “The Great Mismatch,” cited a 2012 study from employment-service firm Manpower, which “reported that more than a third of employers worldwide had trouble filling jobs. Shortages are pressing not just in areas such as engineering but also in areas such as office administration” (para. 2). In short, even though recent graduates may struggle to find a job, “millions of jobs are going unfilled because companies say they cannot find candidates with the right skills” (Blumenstyk, 2014, para. 11).

These two seemingly contradictory findings indicate a much bigger trend in the labor market that is impacting graduate employment. While the recession and its aftershocks seem to be the primary reason why recent college graduates have trouble starting suitable careers, in fact, the simultaneous underemployment and labor shortage indicates a seismic shift in labor needs, one that has been happening for the last few decades. In short, the traditional 40-hour workweek is being replaced with more contract-based, temporary, and/or part-time work arrangements, which are reflective of major shifts in the global economy and technological advances.

This disparity between underemployed graduates and labor shortage is “rooted in the kinds of jobs we have, the kind we need, and the kind we’re losing, and rooted as well in the kind of workers we want and the kind we don’t know what to do with,” as Stiglitz (2012) noted. The economy KU students and graduates are experiencing today is corollary to the economic shifts at the start of the 20th century. The farming industry in the US is a good illustration of just how dramatic these challenges facing graduates today really are. In the early 1900s, farming employed almost 50% of US workers. Today, farming employs only 3% of the workforce. While
food production is consistently high for the US, machinery and automation simply replaced the labor formerly required by farm operations one hundred years ago (Lee, 2012).

Just as the labor demands changed dramatically for farming, the workplace has also undergone a major transition for white- and blue-collar workers in recent decades. Increasingly, as technology expands and improves, “fixed hours, fixed location, and fixed jobs are quickly becoming a thing of the past for many industries” (Lee, 2012). Additionally, the traditional 40-hour workweek and long term employment tenures are giving way to “more subcontractors, temps, freelancers, and self-employed,” to the point where this type of worker now constitutes as much as “a third of the workforce” (Lee, 2012). Kalleberg (2009) noted this increase in “precarious work” in the US, which entails, among other factors, a decline in attachment to employers, and an increase in job insecurity.

While evolving economic realities have significantly changed the workforce, college students as a demographic are different than before— the number students continuing beyond high school has increased, the reasons for attending college have multiplied, and the developmental needs of college students have changed and necessitate a new approach in addressing those needs. In short, many students equate college with a career, and are motivated by the potential for future earnings and professional opportunities. Additionally, while students tend to view college as a way to transition into their professional adult life, their success in preparing for the 21st century workplace is mixed, stymied by a lack of focus, confidence, and understanding of the job search process.

Overwhelmingly, students’ reasons for going to college are often motivated by the promise of a better career and increased income. Getting a degree is rarely an end unto itself. Indeed, there is considerable anxiety about how well education readies one for employment. Moursched, Farrell, and Barton (2013) noted, “44% of American youth are not sure that their postsecondary education has improved their chances of finding a job,” a finding that indicates the extent to which the quality of post-graduation jobs are a means to determine the quality of one’s education (p. 18). This finding may be rooted in another phenomenon that sets this current generation at odds with their parents and grandparents—the Pew Research Center (2014) reported that only 36% of Millennial college graduates are likely to have a job that is “very closely” related to their major, as compared to 54% of older adults (p. 31). As more graduates and working professionals resort to more varied “assignments” over the course of their lives versus a consistent career path, it is evident that one’s major can and will be applied to multiple fields and areas, and is not necessarily bound to any one particular career choice.

Just as students tend to equate a college degree with a career, they also associate a degree with increased earning power. It is well established that college graduates earn substantially more than those who do not complete a degree, and that economic reality is evident in students’ motivations to attend college. A recent study, “American’s Call for Higher Education Redesign” (2013), found that 65% of respondents reported, “earning more money is a very important reason to get education beyond high school” (p. 2). This finding is reinforced in the Pryor, et. al. (2012) study of in-coming freshman, who reported, “being very well off financially’ as a personal goal rose to an all-time-high in 2012, with 81.0% of incoming students reporting this as a ‘very important’ or ‘essential’ personal goal, up from 79.6% in 2011” (p. 4). Universities must recognize that many students see college as a path to a better career and life.

Additional studies indicated further how students reflected on their time in college. One study reported that 66% of students surveyed believed their experience ill-prepared them and their
cohort for working life after college (“The PreparedU Project,” 2014, p. 9). Yet another study found that “about nine in ten with at least a bachelor’s degree say college has already paid off (72%) or will pay off in the future (17%),” which indicates a high satisfaction rate with college, insofar as it was worth the investment, or will be so in other ways (“America’s Call for Higher Education Redesign,” 2013, p. 4). These two findings would seem to present a paradox—are students dissatisfied or satisfied by their college education? While the discrepancy between these findings may be accounted for in different survey populations or more satisfied individuals reporting in greater numbers, the underlying implication is clear—one’s career after graduation is the standard by which one’s education will be judged. In other words, students think about the future in terms of their career, and their perception of their future career colors their assessment of their education.

While the numbers indicate an overwhelming overlap between college and career, this is not to say that students are simply basing their education choices on a job. In fact, this claim is more complicated when it comes to KU students, specifically. A study of segmented student populations reveals an intriguing view of how students may really be divided—not by major or GPA, but by their purposes in coming to college (Ladd, Reynolds, & Selingo, 2014). While many students equate an education with a career, it’s important to note that for some of those same students, their time at KU may be a transitioning experience, wherein a student will “come of age.” Tellingly, the example Ladd, Reynolds, and Selingo (2014) used for the “coming of age” student was a KU student who was not sure of what he wanted to do, but believed that “you can’t get a job without a college degree” (p. 4).

For these students, college “is about broad academic offerings, an active social culture, and trying a variety of activities without knowing exactly where it will lead” (Ladd, Reynolds, & Selingo, 2014, p. 4) Anecdotally, this kind of student seems to be prevalent at KU—students come for the sports, out of family tradition, or because of a strong identification with the Jayhawks. KU is the place where students feel they will move on to the professional world, but they are not quite sure how that will happen. This kind of “transitioning” student also seems to be consistent with what another study labeled as “struggling” students—according to one report, “26% of students felt that they were struggling—wanting to know more, but not feeling well informed” (Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2013, p. 19).

These two groups are certainly not mutually exclusive: students come to KU with expectations of getting a good job after graduation and may also regard their time here as a kind of transitioning experience. But the challenges that come with that mindset are compounded by the difficult work of developing as a professional suited for today’s workplace. As DeLong (2014) reported, “Students who express angst about future employment seem unwilling to invest sufficient time to master the skills needed for success, such as extensive networking, in-depth industry research, resume writing, and interviewing” (para. 10).

Simply put, students underestimate “how much they have to learn,” and fail to understand the hard work required “to land a great job today” (DeLong, 2014, para. 10). Students’ current attitudes and expectations are an acute response to economic trends and a rapidly changing workplace. With increased political demands for universities to account for employment outcomes, KU’s approach must bridge the gap between accountability and responsiveness to student needs. Given these conditions, the best solution in this situation is to integrate vocation with academics through a strong Employability Curriculum.
**Summary**

Employability speaks to a person’s fitness to find suitable work by possessing expert proficiency in a field coupled with practical intelligence. Research on employability indicates a whole range of holistic abilities, such as ability to communicate well, problem solve, leverage technology, and respond intelligently to emotional cues. Additionally, employability entails not only breadth of skills, but also depth in one or two disciplinary or technological proficiencies.

Recent political critiques, social challenges to higher education, and both new and long-developing changes in the economy and labor demands necessitate a change in the way we prepare students for professional level opportunities, be that employment, entrepreneurship, or further education. Given that many students at KU are here explicitly for the sake of bettering their employment prospects, it would seem that working to develop proficiencies associated with employability in students would be a sound approach in the current political, social, and economic circumstances.
Section II—The Employability Curriculum: Dimensions and Program

Recent and long-developing trends in the global economy, along with changes in student and governmental leader expectations of higher education necessitate a coordinated, focused response. For students at KU, their education experience should not only be focused on academics but also on how that knowledge will be applied post-graduation. Through the Employability Curriculum, students will have the opportunity to develop into highly sought after professionals, prepared for the global market.

Key concept: An Employability Curriculum will help prepare KU students to be professionals suited for a global workplace by fostering a breadth of skills, as well as assist students in developing the proficiencies gained in a major course of study or discipline for a dynamic workplace.

Questions addressed:
• Why should KU adopt an Employability Curriculum?
• What dimensions would be featured in an Employability Curriculum?
• How do the dimensions of the Employability Curriculum relate to the KU Core?

Need for KU to adopt an Employability Curriculum

It is one thing to recognize the monumental economic shifts of recent years and the changes in student expectations. It is another to see the relevance of an Employability Curriculum on a local level. As Kalleberg (2009) noted, “policy relating to increased insecurity should ‘help individuals cope with the risks associated with precarious work,’” which is precisely what an Employability Curriculum is intended to do for KU students. The present circumstances necessitate a “reinvention” of the “traditional career services function so it provides leading edge tools and tutoring to prepare students” for the professional workplace (DeLong, 2014).

Given that public perceptions of higher education are increasingly based on graduates’ ability to secure suitable employment, a positive response must center on employability. Dr. Anthony Carnevale, director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, explained the connection between the current political critique of higher education and the career center when he said, “in an environment where public money is going to be scarce...public money ought to be disciplined by a set of outcome standards led by employability” (Abdul-Alim, 2011). An Employability Curriculum that actively adapts to economic and technological changes facing college graduates is critical to the professional success of KU graduates and addresses the concerns of external stakeholders.

It is easy to gloss employability as “the ability to get a good job,” especially since this implication is precisely what appeals to prospective and current students and is also the proven outcome of other employability programs. But employability’s usefulness resides entirely in its purpose to foster the ability to learn and adapt to changing conditions, needs, contexts, and technology. The core of employability may be best articulated by Alvin Toffler, futurist and former editor of Fortune magazine: “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.” Ultimately, the Employability Curriculum at KU will seek to develop these advanced learning competencies in students, who are afterwards “committed to and capable of continuous learning and reflection for the purpose of furthering their understanding of the world and their place in it” (Barrie, 2004, p. 269).
Employability Curriculum dimensions

KU’s Employability Curriculum will consist of seven overarching dimensions. In concert, the following dimensions position individuals to become successful and sought-after professionals.

- **Academic Learning**: developing and excelling at a course of study that provides both breadth and depth combining academic strengths, interests, and specialized knowledge in the context of career aspirations.
- **Experiential Learning**: engaging in purposeful, meaningful experiences outside of the classroom in order to expand and enhance academic, personal and career interests through guided reflection.
- **Career Maturity**: believing in a clear picture of self as it relates to the world of work, having knowledge and direct experience with career exploration and engagement activities, and anticipating changes to career plans once circumstances change.
- **Professional Skills**: demonstrating skills that employers’ value for successful transition to the workplace such as planning and prioritizing work, communication, problem solving, teamwork and collaboration, and leadership.
- **Career Management**: developing and employing the skills necessary to successfully navigate the job search process and making informed, sound judgments in relation to lifetime career progression.
- **Meaningful Connections**: capitalizing on mutually beneficial relationships that expand perspective, build interpersonal communication skills and create access to opportunities.
- **Global Perspective**: navigating the global economy by developing a broader understanding of the different cultures, economies and systems of the world and applying that perspective to the context of work.

Implementing the Employability Curriculum at KU

In order for the Employability Curriculum to be useful there must be multiple avenues for implementation. Over the course of the 2014-15 academic year, the University Career Center will lead efforts to implement the Employability Curriculum. Administratively, the UCC will use the seven dimensions of the Employability Curriculum as a guide, or strategic plan, driving the programs and services provided by the department. Each dimension will have an associated rubric and assessment dashboard to ensure that UCC programs and services are supporting student employability preparation.

As the Employability Curriculum takes shape it is intended that University of Kansas students will be able to satisfy the requirements of the Employability Curriculum in several ways. First, the dimensions of the Employability Curriculum will be formally integrated into the career courses administered by the University Career Center in partnership with several academic units. Second, all KU students will have the opportunity to complete the Employability Curriculum via a self-paced online learning experience leveraging Blackboard. Each dimension will have its own online module. UCC instructors will evaluate student work using rubrics developed for each dimension. Additionally, extended workshops and trainings will be offered for students desiring focused and hands-on attention in completing the requirements of the Employability Curriculum. Also during the 2014-15 academic year, an application will be made to have the Employability Curriculum be recognized as a University of Kansas certificate program.
Connections between the Employability Curriculum and KU Core Curriculum

It is important to note that the dimensions of the Employability Curriculum arise, in part, from some existing educational and academic initiatives, namely, the KU Core Curriculum, as well as other existing requirements. For example, the second dimension, experiential learning, entails engaging in meaningful experiences outside the classroom, a significant component of the KU Core. At KU, internships are already a robust part of students’ experience and career exploration. In fact, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Destination Survey (2013) showed that about 50% of KU students had an internship during their time at KU, and findings showed that students who completed an internship had overall higher rates of finding full-time employment.

While this is certainly positive, the Employability Curriculum would further encourage internship participation with increased partnership opportunities between professional settings and the classroom. This entails encouraging more students to make professional workplaces and experiences part of their education, as well as “creating workplace environments in the classroom,” which “is another way to bring hands-on training to the academic setting” (Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2013, p. 70). In other words, it is important for students to be able to transfer the skills learned in the classroom to other contexts such as service learning, undergraduate research, problem-based learning activities, etc.

Students’ awareness of their own strengths, abilities, and needs as it applies to a career is also an important part of employability. The Employability Curriculum should help students to develop their ability for self-reflection by helping them to “identify and articulate their skills, competencies, interests and motivations in relation to their career planning” (Rees, Forbes, and Kubler, 2006, p. 8).

Like KU Core goals 5 and 6, along with many of the certificate programs currently offered, students in these programs are asked to reflect on their experiences and make connections to other concepts. But integrating the outcomes of these educational experiences should also feed into a larger curriculum of reflection and connection to one’s employability. Within the Employability Curriculum, modules and developmental exercises would help students to reflect on their academic experience and articulate what abilities or skills they have developed. In doing so, students are “making the tacit explicit” and consciously explicating their academic accomplishments into skills legible to employers (Knight, et al., 2003, p. 13).

Blending together experiential learning inside and outside the classroom, expanding the impact of the KU Core goals 5, and 6, as well as fostering more partnerships between KU and employers, would be integral to developing teamwork and collaboration within an Employability Curriculum. An article from Carlson (2014) quoted Phillip D. Gardner, director of the Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University, who argued, "Students absolutely need as many experiences as they can get outside the academy, testing their knowledge base, learning how they can use it and how to build the broader skills that go around it" (para. 5).

Under the Employability Curriculum, the interaction between school and work should be fluid—a student’s educational choices and career aspirations should inform one another; indeed, a strong relationship between education and career is critical to employability. By building upon students’ experience with KU Core goals 5, and 6, the Employability Curriculum
can help students in creating meaningful experiences outside the classroom that will bolster their employability after graduation.

Developing professional skills is critical to the Employability Curriculum. For example, employers today require that employees have excellent communication skills. It is important to note the overlap between the Employability Curriculum and the goals of the KU Core Curriculum, specifically goals 2.1 and 2.2. The written and oral classes needed to fulfill this general education requirement are an important link between academics and the Employability Curriculum.

Given that academics are an essential part of employability, highlighting and articulating the skills developed in these classes as necessary for developing employability, and may help students to see a larger connection between education and career. Additionally, recognizing the connection between these shared competencies may help to integrate the Employability Curriculum into academic frameworks.

One of the key strengths of the Employability Curriculum is helping students to adapt to a global workforce. Especially as a person’s career is more likely than ever to cross borders and entail collaboration with international partners, it is critical that employability at KU emphasize the realities of the global workforce. Some requirements at KU already help students to expand their perspective and raise their awareness of global issues. For example, the Core goal 4.2 emphasizes international studies, either through a class or a study abroad option, the BA degree requires four semesters of a foreign language, and all business degrees include the International Dimension Requirement. Through the Employability Curriculum, students should be able to articulate the insights gained through these international studies to potential employers.

**Summary**

The Employability Curriculum will teach students how to become capable, global professionals during the whole of their working life. The seven dimensions of the Employability Curriculum—academic learning, experiential learning, career maturity, professional skills, career management, meaningful connections, and global perspective—will help students to increase their chances of finding employment that suits their personal strengths and leads to more meaningful, purposeful lives. Furthermore, the Employability Curriculum draws upon existing educational and academic initiatives, such as those developed within the KU Core Curriculum.
Section III—Employability’s Impact on KU

This section explores some of the anticipated outcomes of the Employability Curriculum on KU students, academic departments, and the university as a whole. Overall, the Employability Curriculum should work to develop students into more adaptable professionals who have both technical expertise and broad skills that are attractive to employers, as well as have the capability to create and manage entrepreneurial endeavors. For academic departments, the Employability Curriculum provides a way to communicate the importance of rigorous academic study while also providing a response to workplace demands and helping students to articulate their education in a concrete way to employers. Finally, the Employability Curriculum offers an exciting marketing opportunity for KU as a whole, by providing an answer to questions about the value of a college education and professional opportunities after graduation.

**Key concept:** An Employability Curriculum at KU will help students to become better professionals, strengthen the connection between the academy and business and industry, and result in successful employment outcomes for KU graduates.

Questions addressed:
- What are the anticipated outcomes of the Employability Curriculum for KU students?
- What are the anticipated outcomes of the Employability Curriculum for academic departments?
- What are the anticipated outcomes of the Employability Curriculum for KU as a whole?

**Anticipated outcomes of the Employability Curriculum for KU students**

Above all, the Employability Curriculum will help to optimize students’ transition from KU to employment, further education, or entrepreneurial pursuits. This means not only an increased ability to obtain work, but also increasing the likelihood that students will be employed in a field where their particular competencies and skills are a good match to their chosen path and the adaptability to find and create future work suited to their competencies and society’s needs. Especially for students today, the boundaries between college and work are blurring—now, successful transitions into a career start well before graduation. An effective Employability Curriculum should work to decrease “the likelihood of occupational mismatch and unemployment,” and increase the likelihood of “better matches of person and work resulting in less turnover” (Feller & Whichard, 2005, p. 4). A student who successfully completes the Employability Curriculum will have learned to articulate their skills to potential employers and broadened their understanding of the professional workplace. They will be better prepared for entrepreneurial ventures. Additionally, students will learn about building on each experience within their education and placing it within a broader context, even if it is not strictly within the purview of their major or discipline.

Rather than simply focusing on getting a student into that first job after graduation, students who have successfully completed the Employability Curriculum should “have the skills to cope with changing employers, occupations, and skill demands,” along with “confidence in their ability to advance and develop their career” (Feller & Whichard, 2005, p. 4). A successful Employability Curriculum is likely to result in improved employment outcomes, as reported in “21st Century Skills and the Workplace” (2013), which found that “those who have high 21st century skill development are twice as likely to have higher work quality compared to those who had low 21st century skill development” (p. 4).
It is critical for a successfully employed individual today to possess both depth and breadth in his or her abilities and expertise. Through an Employability Curriculum, students will learn to develop both depth, in terms of knowledge that is marketable to employers, as well as breadth by developing core competencies in communication, collaboration, technical skills, reflective abilities, and career searching competencies. In doing so, the Employability Curriculum works to develop students into capable, adaptable professionals who are prepared for the challenges of the 21st century global economy. KU students who successfully complete the Employability Curriculum will, as outlined in the Feller and Whichard (2005) concept of “knowledge nomads,” possess skills that set them apart as capable and desirable professionals. Such a student will be “comfortable with ambiguity,” a “lifelong learner,” “highly mobile and able to adapt to various situations, cultures, and languages,” a strategic thinker, and “highly entrepreneurial” (p. 50).

**Anticipated outcomes of the Employability Curriculum for academic departments**

The Employability Curriculum bears clear implications for academic departments. Chiefly, the Employability Curriculum will provide a strong and viable means for students within all majors to secure appropriate employment. As political pressure on universities has increased, the criticism of the value of a college degree (and especially liberal arts degrees) has been intense. Defaulting to arguments of intrinsic value is no longer sufficient to answer demands for accountability. As Knight and Yorke (2004) said, “academic subjects cannot ignore the demands of the economy, nor can they deny their students’ need to establish themselves as good employment prospects” (p. 70-71). To be sure, proponents of the liberal arts are aware that there is a problem—Knight and Yorke (2004) reported that UK university English teachers, when asked to think about ways to make an English degree more desirable, offered virtually no input on making the degree more job-related. Instead, the impetus was on marketing it better, and “emphasizing its value in employment terms” (p. 73).

Rather than privilege professional studies over the classical curriculum, the approach offered in the Employability Curriculum is intended to provide students, particularly those in the liberal arts, the leverage needed to thrive in the 21st century. Through the Employability Curriculum, the professional world does not have to “preclude the liberal arts, but can fuse a liberal education with the application of knowledge, effective citizenship, well-roundedness, and even artistry” (Rhee-Weise, 2014). Rather than making a case for why someone should major in Latin American Studies, Linguistics, or Classics, the Employability Curriculum will develop students’ ability to show how the “critical thinking, communication and problem-solving skills” inherent in any liberal arts degree transfers into “identifiable skills for the workforce” (Rhee-Weise, 2014, emphasis added). In short, a sound Employability Curriculum does not privilege majors with obvious aplicability or marketability, but inherently validates the abilities and skills gained in all disciplines.

At its core, employability is not “inimical to good learning,” as Knight and Yorke (2003) argued, “but is supportive of it” (p. 3-4). This synergistic approach is most recently observed in Clark University’s efforts to change how liberal arts students apply their knowledge to real-world problems. As David Angel, president of Clark University noted in a recent interview, efforts have been focused on getting students to apply their “knowledge to work in the world,” with the aim of preparing students for professional employment (Berrett, 2014). Without strong, rigorous academics, it is impossible to develop the skills inherent in the Employability
Curriculum. Likewise, with a stress on developing and identifying the value of liberal arts to the workforce and a graduate’s career, the Employability Curriculum affords academic disciplines the much-needed and effective ammunition required to address the political and social critiques of higher education.

It is important to note that the Employability Curriculum observes the importance and validity of all majors and disciplines, as well as the boundaries of roles in preparing students for a changing workplace. Faculty “teach students to communicate, write, apply quantitative methods, and use technology,” which is exactly what makes “a liberal arts education relevant.” But what “faculty cannot be expected to do, however, is to ‘close the deal’ to move graduates into the workforce” (Mitchell, 2012). It is not the case that every instructor at KU must now adopt and teach employability, but through the Employability Curriculum, students in every discipline have a means for articulating their abilities and enhancing their desirability to a demanding workplace.

**Anticipated outcomes of EC for KU as a whole**

The Employability Curriculum speaks to the needs of students, as well as the need for academic departments to assist students in achieving success. Additionally, these outcomes also speak to the ultimate bottom-line for retention and graduation rates. By adopting and sustaining the Employability Curriculum, KU stands to “attract and retain high quality students and maintain its competitive advantage in the global market” (“Why is Employability Important,” 2011).

Section one established that students today make choices about their education based on their future career plans. Bearing in mind the enormous importance students place on getting “a good job” and improving their earning power, KU can gain a unique marketing position by emphasizing employability. Additionally, by addressing the economic realities and changing student needs and expectations, KU can enhance efforts to address the problems associated with retention and graduation rates. Currently, students entering college overwhelmingly believe that they will graduate in four years. Over 80% of first-year students have this expectation, and yet, only about half of all students will actually achieve that goal (Pryor, et. al., 2012, p. 5). This mismatch between expectation and reality bears out in earlier research, which found that “the average degree completion rate for public universities from 2004 to 2009 was between 40-43%” (Shoemaker, Hellwege, & Krieshok, n.d., p. 1). KU’s own data for the 2009 entering class shows a four-year graduation rate of 37.5%, and a six-year graduation rate for the 2006 entering class at 64.1% (“Retention and Graduation Reports,” 2014).

In order to meet the chancellor’s goal of a 70% six-year graduation rate, it is important that KU meets the needs of the changing population and adapts student services accordingly. Adopting the Employability Curriculum is an explicit recognition that even traditional 18- to 24-year-old students think of their education differently than others before them. In effect, KU stands to gain a considerable opportunity for marketing the value of a KU education that can hold its own in an increasingly competitive education marketplace. By offering an Employability Curriculum that highlights the developmental process of turning students into professionals, KU can move past the signaling of “a college degree,” which is now offered in an ever-growing number of less expensive institutions, to offering students “employability,” the means to successfully develop and begin a life-long career responsive to changes and challenges.

Adopting the Employability Curriculum would prove to be a successful method for improving student retention and graduation as well as enhancing post-graduation success. As David Angel
said, Clark University’s application numbers have increased by 70% in the last two years, indicative of the positive response that their employability program garnered from new undergraduates (Berrett, 2014). The efficacy of programs that develop students professionally has already been established, as research done by the University Career Center found that “26% of the variance in institutional integration and 22% of the variance in intention to persist to graduation, known predictors of graduation, can be traced to career services outcomes such as vocational identity, confidence in engaging in occupational exploration and career decision self-efficacy (p<.001)” (Shoemaker, Hellwege, & Krieshok, n.d., p. 2-3). Additionally, given that the Employability Curriculum would work directly to increase career competence, another factor that positively contributes to persistence, investing resources and effort into establishing a strong employability program for KU students indicates a strong case for positive gains in retention (Shoemaker, Hellwege, & Krieshok, n.d., p. 3).

**Summary**

Employability is one of the most well-researched and feasible modes of action to positively effect students, academic departments, and the university as a whole. A strong Employability Curriculum at KU will increase students’ ability to create life-long careers that are suited for a global, technological workplace and changing economy. Students within all academic majors at KU will have the opportunity to learn to articulate transferable skills to future employers, as well as develop entrepreneurial skills and strengths. Additionally, adopting the Employability Curriculum can potentially benefit KU through positive retention and graduation rates.
Conclusion—The Class of 2019 and Beyond

The University of Kansas faces a challenge today: given a tuition cost of $16,000 per year (average of both in-state and out-of-state tuition), a proliferation of distance learning options, and the $20,000 debt that the average KU student accumulates during her or his time, why should a student come to KU (“College Scorecard,” 2014)?

A significant portion of the answer is that students should come to KU because we will offer a comprehensive, efficient, and well-developed Employability Curriculum. Strong evidence and programs already in place at other universities indicate that employability is an excellent response to the challenges to higher education, graduate employment rates, and social expectations. In summary, the Employability Curriculum can offer:

• an intentional, united vision of students’ professional education. It improves the quality of a KU student’s education by requiring students to translate classroom learning into opportunities for practical application.

• a deliberate response to realities of now and the future. The workplace and economy have changed on both a global and local level and will continue to change rapidly; accordingly, the Employability Curriculum is a dynamic response to the changing state of the economy, workplace, and student needs.

• an increased collaboration between the professional world and KU, as well as between departments within KU. Increased partnership between professional workplaces and education settings is a proven way to improve a student’s chances for professional success after graduation.

Ultimately, the Employability Curriculum is an answer to the question, “how should KU students prepare for the professional world?” Should a comprehensive, well-developed Employability Curriculum be implemented, KU students stand to increase their chances of creating sustainable, satisfying careers. KU students will be better equipped to face the challenges evident in today’s new workplace. Finally, KU students will attest to the high value of a KU degree in a digital world and volatile economy.
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