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## **“Is College Worth It?” Arguing for Composition’s Value with the Citizen-Worker**

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This article demonstrates that the terms of the debate over whether college is “worth it” undermine composition’s mainstay arguments for relevance. In light of students’ market-driven motivations, the article posits a citizen-worker perspective in composition that refuses the compartmentalization of economic, cultural, and civic functions of college.

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**R**ecent CCC round-robin reviews of books such as *Academically Adrift*, *Inside the College Gates*, and *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* have invited compositionists to participate in academic and public debates about the function and efficacy of higher education. Dominic DelliCarpini, reviewing *College* and *We’re Losing Our Minds*, argues that “current perceptions of higher education present serious challenges to our work,” and that “if we are to act as literacy advocates, it would be shortsighted of us to ignore the chance to analyze the rhetorical appeals” employed by these critiques (546). With this in mind, I turn to the recurring debate over whether college is “worth it” and consider how composition as a field can speak back to this debate and why it must.

The 2008 financial crisis and Great Recession caused a crisis of confidence for Americans, reopening old debates over the value of higher education. While prominent public figures such as President Obama advocated for college as a

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gateway to the “knowledge economy” of the future, the higher education and popular media commentariat stoked debates over whether college is “worth it” if graduating high school seniors and college students faced dramatic unemployment figures and skyrocketing tuition.<sup>1</sup> These debates gained traction and appeared in a range of forums from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to the *New York Times* to Fox Business News. The debate has even been featured as subject for the 2014 Advanced Placement in English Language and Composition Examination (College Board, “AP”). Moreover, as NPR reports, it is a perennial question in periods of economic downturn since the 1970s. As such, we ought to recognize that this debate is not only about the efficacy of college education (as Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa’s *Academically Adrift* purports to be) but also is a response to precarious labor markets and economic uncertainty facing prospective college students.<sup>2</sup>

The terms of the “worth it” debates, which privilege return on investment over learning outcomes favored by advocates of liberal education, position college advocates to take up literacy myth constructions of higher education. According to these narratives, college produces value by yielding good jobs.<sup>3</sup> The economic uncertainty motivating the question of “worth” also undermines composition’s traditional reliance on the redistributive function of higher education, as high debt burden and uncertain employment weaken the narrative of social mobility through education. Likewise, this economic focus makes appeals to civic literacy appear irrelevant. The effect of this debate is a kind of containment that limits the cultural and civic value of higher education, naturalizing the view that college is an individual investment.

In this article I propose that compositionists refuse the compartmentalization of cultural, civic, and economic functions of higher education and consider the merits of understanding the subject of composition in terms of the citizen-worker. This concept, which grows out of such work as James Berlin’s *Rhetoric, Poetics, and Culture*, Tony Scott’s *Dangerous Writing*, and Catherine Chaput’s *Inside the Teaching Machine*, recognizes the cultural and civic functions of composition but also understands that “the good man speaking well” is looking for a job after graduation. Framing our claims in terms of the citizen-worker allows us to speak to economic anxieties without reverting to domesticating vocationalism or literacy myth constructions of higher education.

A close look at a 2009 forum appearing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* offers insight into the primary claims structuring this debate and how these claims position advocates of higher education access. This iteration of the debate often approaches the question of “worth” through a cost-benefit

analysis that places economic opportunity in opposition to economic costs of attendance. This shift would seem to weaken compositionists' stake in college advocacy by distancing the value of higher education from what happens in the classroom. However, I argue that underlying themes of access and the function of a college education invite compositionists to contribute to this debate. To better understand the range of responses available to compositionists in the "worth it" debate, I review the ways that scholars have traditionally defined

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the discipline's value and, by extension, implicitly defined the university's social function. Specifically, I examine compositionists' claims about the redistributive and civic value of composition and their reticence about speaking to the vocational potential of the discipline. Seeking to make composition more salient to the terms of the "worth it"

debate, I conclude with a consideration of how we may productively participate by engaging with the notion of *citizen-workers*—a term that articulates students as political and economic subjects. I argue that composition curricula attuned to the needs of citizen-workers offer an effective response to the question of "is college worth it?"

### **Deliberating the Value of Higher Education**

The debate over whether college is "worth it" is characterized by a pattern of crisis rhetoric that illustrates that this debate can be best understood as a response to precarious job markets. As with other points in the history of literacy, "worth it" commentators foster a sense of crisis—an exceptional moment in an otherwise functional system—and use this crisis to influence public conceptions of education, society, and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. Kevin Carey describes the formula for the college crisis by excerpting from articles dating back to the early 1980s:

Start with a grim headline, like "Grimly, Graduates are Finding Few Jobs." (Times, 1991). Build the lead around a recent college graduate in the most demeaning possible profession (janitor, meter maid, file clerk) and living circumstances (on food stamps, eating Ramen noodles, moved back home with parents.) Pull back to a broader thesis, like "The payoff from a bachelor's degree is beginning to falter." (Times, 2005). Cite an expert asserting that this is no passing trend, e.g. "'We are going to be turning out about 200,000 to 300,000 too many college graduates a year in the '80s,' said Ronald E. Kutscher, Associate Commissioner at the Bureau of Labor Statistics." (Times, 1983). Finish with a rueful quote from the recent

college graduate. "When I have to put my hands into trash soaked with urine or vomit, I say 'What am I doing here? This job is the bottom. Did I go to college to do this?'" (Post, 1981).

Carey's analysis in this article indicts the media for a failure to historicize their claims and an inclination to sensationalize. However, he does not connect this discourse to a broader ideology by asking what the consequences are of these formulaic crises. The question of whether college is "worth it" emerges when economic uncertainty appears to threaten upward mobility, even as public figures such as President Obama proclaim college to be "the surest path to the middle class" ("Affordability").<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the objections to vocationalism often raised in public academic forums,<sup>5</sup> to posit that attending college will yield a good job reproduces what Harvey Graff describes as literacy myths concerning the relationship between education and economics. Although literacy is commonly regarded by the public as the key to social advancement, in reality literacy has often been used to manipulate, oppress, and control mass populations and has no *direct* link to, for example, economic development (Graff 27). According to "commonsense" advocates of higher education, college is an economically transformative event because the experience produces skills, knowledge, and personal networks that grant college graduates jobs valued at one million dollars more in lifetime earnings (Carnevale, Rose, and Cheah 1). However, other commentators challenge claims about "the big payoff" by pointing to stagnating middle incomes, higher debt burdens, and the difficulty of measuring the income gap between college graduates and nongraduates (Carey; Pilon). Moreover, as the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau has reported, "high student debt burdens limit borrowers' ability to take on new financial obligations," including traditional middle-class rites of passage such as homeownership (7). In light of the complexity of the question of higher education's worth, Graff's literacy myth provides a valuable lens through which to approach this debate because deconstruction of the literacy myth decouples economic gains and education, the primary two elements under scrutiny. Graff writes, "The great danger [. . .] is the simple presumption that economic development in particular depends directly on investment in and high rates of productivity from systems of formal education. Whereas education and the economy are undoubtedly related, sometimes intimately, the nature of those connections is anything but simple, direct, unmediated" (27). In this respect, the "worth it" debate presents an opportunity to foster discussion about potentially damaging literacy myths. By

participating in this discussion, compositionists may speak back to apparent market forces that policymakers leverage in their attempt to influence program administration. Such an intervention represents an attempt to shift the terms of higher education away from commercialism and toward engagement with the complex relationship between literacy and the economy.

We can observe economic anxieties in the primary organizing tension of this debate: the question of whether economic opportunity outweighs the financial burden of college attendance. However, underlying this tension are competing visions of the university's role in society and constructions of who belongs in college. By primarily engaging with these questions in ways that locate higher education's value in precarious labor markets, commentators place an impossible burden of proof on higher education ambassadors and reinforce literacy myths about the relationship between higher education and economic gains.

In a 2009 forum-style article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, several high-profile figures in economics, policy, and career counseling weigh in on the debate. Regarding the question of whether a college degree is valuable for individuals, and whether this means most people should attend, even contributors who disagree rely on the same core assumption: precarious labor conditions drive student motivation and therefore determine the value of a college degree. Public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich explicitly acknowledges the loss of good jobs for those who do not attend college, arguing that the notion that college provides economic benefits for individuals "applies more than ever. With the disappearance of virtually all highly paid, low-skill jobs, the only way that most Americans can fulfill their aspirations for middle-class status is through acquiring a higher education credential and the skills that go with it" ("Are Too Many"). If Yankelovich imagines a hostile labor market as a factor in encouraging higher college enrollment, career counselor Marty Nemko and economics professor Richard Vedder see increased college enrollment as a threat to economic stability. Nemko writes,

Increasing college-going rates may actually hurt our economy. We now send 70 percent of high school graduates to college, up from 40 percent in 1970. At the same time, employers are accelerating their off-shoring, part-timing, and temping of as many white-collar jobs as possible. That results in ever more unemployed and underemployed BA's. Meanwhile, there's a shortage of tradespeople to take the Obama infrastructure-rebuilding jobs. ("Are Too Many")

Vedder also contends that the number of BA's has oversaturated the market. He writes, "A large subset of our population should not go to college, or at least not at public expense. The number of new jobs requiring a college degree is now less than the number of young adults graduating from universities, so more and more graduates are filling jobs for which they are academically overqualified" ("Are Too Many"). In fact, in a post on his own *Chronicle* blog Vedder cites a Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) figure of seventeen million overqualified workers ("Why"). This figure is not universally accepted, however, as Carey notes that the BLS does not take into consideration how jobs that formerly required no advanced education often innovate technologically to reduce labor costs. The result is technically complex jobs that are still viewed as low-tech (Carey). But is college valuable for low-tech industries? *New York Times* columnist David Leonhardt cites a study by the Center on Education and the Workforce to argue that not only is a college education more valuable now than in the past, but also that college degrees pay off even for jobs that do not require one (Leonhardt). He rebuts two common "anti-college arguments" by pointing out that the real costs of college are reasonable after taking financial aid into account and by arguing that the gap between college-educated workers and non-college-educated workers is significant, even if that gap is not growing rapidly.

In addition to sharing the assumption that a precarious labor market drives demand for and, therefore, determines the value of a college degree, these commentators also agree that college education produces value primarily through the production of social capital rather than skills or knowledge. In other words, to the extent that contributors explain *how* college degrees produce higher earners, they rely on socialization and social capital to explain college graduates' success. For example, Yankelovich argues that because employers train new hires, the higher education *credential* is more valuable than the skills. Charles Murray, political scientist at the American Enterprise Institute, agrees that credentials seem to outclass skills, writing that most of the wage benefit for graduates "is associated with the role of the BA as a job requirement instead of anything that students with BA's actually learn," which he contends speaks to the need for certifications, not bachelor's degrees ("Are Too Many"). Arum and Roksa in *Academically Adrift* take issue with credentialist constructions of higher education on the grounds that they undermine the educational experience of college, writing, "A market-based logic of education encourages students to focus on its instrumental value—that is, as a credential—and to ignore its academic meaning and moral character" (16). They further argue that "there is

no guarantee that students will prioritize academic learning at the core of their institutional demands. There are many reasons instead to expect students as consumers to focus on receiving services that will allow them, as effortlessly and comfortably as possible, to attain valuable educational credentials that can be exchanged for later labor market success” (17).

While this critique of credentialism suggests instrumental motives undermine the ability of the university to build character among students, for some commentators understanding *how* the credential works is closely tied to the socializing function of higher education. For example, in *Going Broke by Degree* Vedder argues, “College-educated workers are relatively well-paid partly because higher education is a screening device for employers,” but they “earn more not because they’ve acquired valuable skills in college; rather, it is because the college admissions process is a valuable way of identifying talented individuals” (xix). In addition to these cognitive and character traits, college also participates in what Sharon O’Dair describes as “embourgeoisment,” training students to understand and perform middle-class culture (600). Charles Sykes draws these two aspects together in *ProfScam*. He extends “culture wars” claims that curricular reforms influenced by identity politics threaten the university’s cultural mission, which he links to its economic function. He writes,

The problem of the university curriculum is no longer merely that there is no central body of shared knowledge at the heart of the university education—certain books that all educated men and women presumably would read. In the last several decades . . . the bachelor’s degree has been so completely stripped of meaning that employers cannot even be sure if its holder has minimum skills that were once taken for granted among college graduates. (82)

In this construction of the university, Sykes moves seamlessly from a culture wars critique to an argument about employability, so that the “skills” that employers seek are roughly analogous to what E. D. Hirsch called “cultural literacy.” While one of the functions of higher education may be to socialize potential workers to the norms of professional or middle-class culture, the vagueness this process entails feeds into a literacy myth of higher education. Graff and Duffy write, “The vagueness of such definitions [of literacy such as “civic literacy”] allows for conceptions of literacy that go beyond what has been examined empirically, thus investing literacy with the status of myth” (42). Graff and Duffy develop this idea through a critique of “reductive dichotomies” that characterize this mythos, which we can also see in how commentators discuss preparedness and who “belongs” in college.

Accompanying discussions of the economic opportunities represented by higher education are contested explanations for rising costs. According to the College Board, "Average published tuition and fees at public four-year colleges and universities increased by 31% beyond the rate of inflation over the five years from 2002-03 to 2007-08, and by another 27% between 2007-08 and 2012-13" (College Board, "Tuition"). Explanations for skyrocketing attendance costs provide insight into how commentators construct the university for the public. Marc Bousquet has been a vocal critic of administrative costs, arguing, "Especially at the upper levels, administrative pay has soared as well, also in close relation to the shrinking compensation of other campus workers" (*How* 6). Jeffrey J. Williams, on the other hand, locates the problem in a retreat from the social welfare state, writing, "The post-welfare state university more accurately represents the privatized model of the university after the rollback of the welfare state. . . . The welfare state university held a substantial role in redistribution; the post-welfare state holds a lesser role in redistribution and a more substantial role in private accumulation" ("Post-Welfare" 198). In other words, increased costs of higher education are the product of state and university policy choices that shift the burden of higher education costs to individuals as part of a revision of the primary function of the university from being a social good to an individual investment. Vedder agrees that university administration escalates costs, though he adds to that list tenure, cross-subsidy of research, a lack of market-imposed discipline, and the significance of third-party subsidies (*Going* xv-xvii). Notably, he argues that privatization on the for-profit college model is both the solution to and inevitable consequence of high costs (xxii). He comes to this conclusion as a refutation of the notion that investment in the university provides a spillover effect, arguing that "at the individual level, higher education is typically a good investment, even though the marginal return to the community may be very low" (xx). The gap between Williams's vision of education as a social good and Vedder's argument for privatization poses a challenge to the core of higher education. Privatizing all higher education means restricting access to the economic and social elite, effectively surrendering the land grant mission of many state universities. At the same time, without reducing costs to students, colleges risk a de facto privatization.

Furthermore, the discourse of higher education as individual investment, evidenced here by Vedder, naturalizes the idea that student loans are a necessary part of college. However, student loans impact whether and where students go to college and significantly affect quality of life after college. Williams argues



that if we see debt “as central to people’s actual experience of the university,” we can see that debt restructures lessons of higher education, teaching students “that higher education is a pay-as-you-go transaction,” that debt “teaches career choices,” and that it “teaches civic lessons. It teaches that the university is not a space but a market” (“New”). If we recognize, as Allison L. Hurst argues, that debt aversion is more pronounced among working-class students (25), then Williams’s argument about the impact of debt on career choice also resonates with Patrick J. Finn’s *Literacy with an Attitude*, a polemical study of how schooling at lower levels offers working-class children “domesticating education, which leads to functional literacy, literacy that makes a person productive and dependable, but not troublesome” (ix–x). The national narrative of higher education posits that college is the best path to economic mobility, and as a result, working-class students take out loans as an investment in this narrative. Likewise, Bousquet notes that 80 percent of college students work on average thirty hours a week, a situation that will invariably impact their grades and attrition rates (“Take” 641). The result is a class of individuals with severe college debt who, in order to make minimum payments, cannot afford to challenge their employer on working conditions or whose employment choices will be tailored around their debt, a situation that parallels Finn’s observations about education at lower levels. Higher debt burdens also contribute to stratification within higher education as lower-income students opt for less-selective and less costly institutions.

### **Arguing for Composition’s Public Value**

Based on this analysis of the debate, we can see that even though commentators construe the challenge to higher education in terms that distance questions of value from the experience of the classroom, the ways that these commentators respond to this moment of crisis have implications not only for access and admissions but also for curriculum development. In order to respond most effectively to this debate, I look to how compositionists have argued for the field’s value in earlier higher education debates.

Composition’s “service ethic” means that composition programs must be responsive to university missions, and students’ performance in composition is often taken as a marker of whether they belong in college. The first-year writing requirement, which Sharon Crowley describes as “the institutional manifestation of composition’s service ethic” (229), positions compositionists on the front lines of college preparedness, either as gatekeepers or facilitators. So while the

question may be "is college worth it?" composition's claims to increase access and its arguments for civic training represent two of the most prominent ways that the field has argued for its—and the university's—value to society at large.

Redistributive arguments for the value of composition are frequently mobilized in defense of basic writing programs. Mina P. Shaughnessy notes in her introduction to *Errors and Expectations* that the open admissions movement grew out of social movements of the 1960s and 1970s (1). Her argument defending basic writing and the students served by these programs leverages an egalitarian ethos in order to promote understanding of these students as beginners rather than as ineducable. She notes that these students "were in college now for one reason: that their lives might be better than their parents', that the lives of their children might be better than theirs so far had been" (3). Opening the doors to greater numbers of poor, minority, and academically marginalized groups also invited protest from some teachers and external commentators, who gestured toward these students' written errors as evidence that they did not belong in college. She counters this "obsession with error" by demonstrating the logics contained in student writing, ultimately arguing that "[basic writing] students write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes" (5). While Shaughnessy's focus on formal aspects of writing and her metaphors for student writers have been critiqued by scholars such as Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu, Tom Fox notes that the open admissions movement and Shaughnessy's advocacy for basic writing students represented a significant shift away from composition's dominant gatekeeper function (40). He also notes the significance of writing as a marker of college preparedness, pointing out that "because of the particular association of literacy with values," for opponents of access "to claim that students are illiterate is to argue that they are *unfit* for college" (43). Fox further argues that *Errors and Expectations* was a well-crafted political document for resisting containment of basic writing students and for its ability to supplant deficit models of error with a theory of difference (45).

While Shaughnessy's paradigmatic defense of basic writing shapes how composition understands its institutional function in service to these students, many commentators' characterization of these students reproduce the "obsession with error" observed by Shaughnessy. For example, Jackson Toby's *Lowering of Higher Education* uses student writing errors as opening anecdote for his second chapter's title claim that "maximizing access to college maximizes the

enrollment of underprepared students.” Writing that he felt “morally obliged to correct errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar,” he notes students’ tendency to confuse homophones and cites other educators’ memoirs and public statements for examples of students’ poor writing ability (38, 40). He pivots from these examples to argue that remediation represents “a tremendous financial burden” and that the efficacy of this remediation is questionable, “judging by the number of students who require remediation and after getting it, do not complete their college program” (44).<sup>6</sup> While Shaughnessy’s advocacy offers strategies for speaking back to these persistent deficit constructions of students, these strategies do not directly engage the market-oriented terms of the “worth it” debate.

This problem becomes apparent when commentators such as Vedder challenge the notion of college for all by claiming that expanded access threatens the value of college. He writes, “As the proportion of Americans expecting to go to college grows, it loses its ‘higher’ education quality. Some complex forms of knowledge and ideas require high levels of cognitive skills and discipline to master, and as we make colleges institutions for all, we dilute quality” (qtd. in Weber). Notably, this statement suggests that literacy derives its value from scarcity, a sentiment that echoes what Catherine Prendergast describes as “a conception of literacy as White property” (11). She notes, “Once African Americans were granted relief in one literacy environment—public high school, for example—that environment was subsequently perceived to have lowered its value” (11). The connection of whiteness and scarcity becomes apparent in Vedder’s *Going Broke by Degree*, which further links this scarcity model of literacy to affirmative action admissions policies, arguing that eliminating affirmative action would be an effective cost-cutting measure: “To the extent that the elimination of affirmative action policies in the university community leads to a reduction in minority admissions, it might well also lead to improved retention rates and a decline in the highly inefficient practice of admitting marginally qualified students who then fail to make the academic grade” (184). So while anxieties about precarious labor markets spur the debate, “is college worth it?” may also be understood as part of America’s history of grappling with the value of mass literacy, in line with “Why Johnny Can’t Write” rebukes of remediation and antagonism toward initiatives to expand minority presence such as affirmative action. Just as compositionists ought to heed DelliCarpini’s entreaty to engage with popular critiques of higher education, we should also be attentive to how the shifting terms of these critiques may be used as a platform for limiting access for historically marginalized groups.

Tom Fox likewise relies on the redistributive function of college in his defense of access during the “standards” debate of the 1990s. He writes, “If higher education is going to serve democratic purposes, that is, if higher education is going to be a means of redistributing wealth and privilege to people of color, women, and other marginalized groups, then increased access is the critical first step” (1–2). While Fox’s premise is compelling when we accept the narrative that college attendance yields sufficient wealth or cultural capital to produce social mobility, the force of this position has been systematically eroded by the precarious labor conditions that inspire the “worth it” debate. Even within higher education, stratification among institutions threatens this redistributive narrative. For example, John Alberti argues that the disparity between elite institutions and the “working class colleges” that educate the majority of students threatens to reproduce class differences among college graduates, so that students graduating from elite institutions manage the “paper working class” produced by community colleges, regional campuses, and second-tier state colleges (566). Claims to the redistributive power of composition or higher education are further undermined by the fact that composition programs at large public universities rely on contingent faculty who, Scott argues, despite their advanced degrees, ought to be understood as working class (115). In other words, these teachers embody the precarity that students confront when they leave the university. This situation, compounded by student debt burdens and stagnating middle-class incomes, weakens compositionists’ claims to the redistributive function of college.

In linking redistribution to democratic purposes, Fox also gestures toward another mainstay defense of composition: the civic function of higher education. Richard Ohmann’s opening statement in “Citizenship and Literacy Work” exemplifies the argument for composition’s civic function: “Democracy can’t work unless citizens are literate and informed” (6). This civic function is also frequently leveraged in service-learning composition scholarship. Linda Flower in *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* describes the emergence of the rhetoric of public engagement among scholars who connect cultural critique to action in the public sphere. For Flower, the rhetoric of public engagement offers perspective on “the often unacknowledged rhetorical agency of the voiceless and powerless” and also counters notions of “a media-controlled public sphere with its closely observed accounts of *local counterpublics*” (5–6). Where service-learning scholars locate the work of composition within the public sphere, Rosa A. Eberly positions the public sphere within the composition classroom by arguing that students in these courses represent proto-publics

(166). In her argument for citizen-critics, Eberly positions students “to reclaim some of the public arenas lost to corporate capitalism” (2). While citizenship represents a dominant site of advocacy for many compositionists, Chaput warns that citizenship as a central tenet of composition is fraught because “teaching for citizenship, however ill or well intentioned, often maintains the inequalities of the current cultural, political, and economic processes of capitalism” because the category of citizen obscures “the classed positionality into which we are hailed” (237). As I argue below, framing composition not only in terms of crafting citizen subjectivities but rather *citizen-worker* subjectivities represents one way that we can affirm the civic goals of higher education while also speaking to the significance of work for students and policymakers.

By framing the work of composition in civic terms, these scholars position the field in conversation with a larger cultural discourse exemplified by President Obama, who campaigned on civic service in 2008 and 2012 and who has framed college itself as part of the vision of civic service. For example, responding to the 2008 financial crisis, Obama argues that “it is the responsibility of every citizen to participate in” higher education because “this country needs and values the talents of every American” (“Joint Session”). Promoting the civic function of composition also speaks to the 2012 report “A Crucible Moment,” commissioned by the Department of Education, which links civic engagement to educational outcomes such as retention and graduation, economic outcomes such as employment, and moral outcomes such as “habits of social responsibility and civic participation” (National Task Force v). Notably, these texts also explicitly link civic and economic outcomes.

Although college in the public imagination serves to prepare students for careers, vocationalism is largely absent from compositionists’ arguments for relevance or the value of higher education. In *Unmaking the Public University*, Christopher Newfield analyzes the response of the humanities, and particularly English departments, to cultural shifts surrounding the dominance of neoliberal attitudes toward higher education. In response to the decline of full-time, tenure-track positions and English PhDs struggling on the job market, he observes an attitude of economic determinism that he argues only learned “one-half of the lesson of business [...]: that the market was to be adapted to, not to be criticized or changed” (149). Rather than surrender to market logics, Newfield argues, the humanities ought to

respond to “market” environments by increasing one’s own influence over the market’s demand decisions. This [means] learning how to *manage* markets—how

to discover hidden demands, how to create demand for products one thinks are important, how to adapt the market to one's output, how to subordinate markets to the needs of one's "customers," not to mention the wider society. (149–50)

In other words, for Newfield, a renewed attention to the economic, including shaping demand for our majors by demonstrating their value, represents one response to the widely circulated consumerist attitudes among students. This requires challenging the view that humanities and social sciences departments are subsidized by the sciences and engineering. In contrast to this commonplace, he demonstrates that "the sociocultural fields are direct financial contributors to the financial base for technological R & D" (219). By arguing for our economic value to students and the university, scholars in these fields are better poised to respond to our students' and other stakeholders' attention to a financial bottom line.

Historically, we might see the land grant mission of many state institutions as one way that universities have expressed their mission in specifically economic terms. Although many decry the influence of corporatism in recent decades, Chaput argues that the public research university "was structured in explicit collaboration with the needs of the capitalist political economy" (ix). In light of the vocational orientation of many of our students and policymakers, and the specifically economic terms of the "worth it" debate, we in composition should reflect on how aspects of vocationalism can be appropriated to advance a reflexive, flexible vision of the relationship between higher education, composition, and the economy.

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### **Positioning the Citizen-Worker as a Response to "Worth It"**

With the review of arguments in the "worth it" debate, we can see that many of these issues speak to structural and institutional problems generally understood as beyond the scope of composition. However, some scholarship within composition speaks productively to the tensions emerging within this debate, offering a strategy for addressing the underlying anxieties about worker status and precarious labor markets. Broadly understood, scholarship on cultivating a citizen-worker ethos among students resists the compartmentalization of higher education's cultural, civic, and economic functions.

While this compartmentalization may be derived from the ways we privilege the humanist subject (or reject vocationalism), we might also consider how the economic has been written out of composition and rhetoric. For example, Joshua S. Hanan in his contribution to *Communication and the Economy* describes how the classical rhetorical tradition maintained a distinction between the *polis* and the *oikos*, the sphere of household management (67). Although the concept of *oikos* and *oikonomia* became more closely associated with the project of the *polis* with the emergence of political economy, Hanan argues that rhetorical theory has not yet developed a productive concept for the influence of the economy in the production of rhetorical subjects. He writes,

If for Aristotle the appropriate anthropological description of humanity was that of a political animal, or *Zôion politikôn*, for modern theorists of the marketplace the appropriate description would be *homo oeconomicus*. As a “subject of interest” defined not only by her juridical rights but also her capacity to make consumptive decisions in a marketplace structured around the logics of competition (Foucault 2008), *homo oeconomicus* inaugurates a new biopolitical problematic for rhetoric that challenges its classical origins in the *polis* and not the *oikos*. (68)

In other words, to focus on the subject of composition in civic terms without engaging its economic role is to maintain a construction of rhetoric in the public sphere that does not adequately recognize how deeply intertwined these functions have become, for example, as we “vote with our dollar.”

An effective response to the “worth it” debate not only argues for the value of college access but also advances a concept of composition that speaks to students’ and the public’s ambivalence about joining a precarious labor market. Many scholars in composition have started this conversation, including Chaput and Scott, by demonstrating ways that compositionists can refuse insularity from economic issues. Chaput argues composition ought to embrace a historical materialist approach that incorporates recognition of the economic subject into the composition curriculum. From this perspective of “working-class professionalism,” compositionists ought to “teach students to be working-class professionals and not simply professional cogs or passive citizens in the machinations of global capitalism” (230). Similarly in *Dangerous Writing*, Scott advances a political-economic view of composition that recognizes “teaching and writing as concrete and commodified labor” (12). From this vantage point, he refutes the tendency to view the university as a culturally elitist institution. By challenging the construction of professionalism that distances college students and instructors from working-class Others, and by calling attention to

the precarious working conditions of adjunct faculty, Chaput and Scott work to undermine totalizing myths of college that rely on "ivory tower" narratives.

Berlin's entreaty for composition to prepare students to enter the workforce provides a valuable bridge between the civic function of composition and Chaput's and Scott's articulation of composition in terms that privilege students' and instructors' roles as workers. He contends, "Colleges ought to offer a curriculum that places preparation for work within a comprehensive range of democratic and educational concerns" (Berlin 51). For Berlin, this means encouraging students to understand their own situation in terms of the interests of the larger community, preparing "intelligent, articulate, and responsible citizens who understand their obligation and their right to insist that economic, social, and political power be exerted in the best interests of the community" (52). John Trimbur characterizes this position as advocating "a social-democratic citizen-worker as the subject of rhetoric" (501). This concept leverages a collectivist ethos and encourages students to see themselves as workers in a particular historical context, or what Berlin describes as the post-modern reorganization of labor. By positioning their education in relation to notions of precarity, workers' rights, and collective welfare, and by arguing that these conditions are the product of cultural rhetorics, Berlin's citizen-worker asks students to consider how employment opportunities are political choices. Such an orientation promotes what Russell K. Durst characterizes as "reflective instrumentalism," which Durst proposes as a way to "gain students' cooperation" in critical or culturally conscious pedagogies (178). Where Newfield argues that humanities disciplines ought to more deliberately manage markets, the citizen-worker as subject of composition offers a path for compositionists to more deliberately influence the agents operating within the market.

In considering the citizen-worker as the subject of composition, we should also take note of scholarship that challenges this construction. Within composition studies, Chaput resists teaching for citizenship, pointing out that the civic ethos may be exclusionary and does not adequately speak to the complexities of global capitalism. With this in mind, effective teaching for the citizen-worker would ask students to examine their positionality as workers and consumers within the system of global capitalism, including interrogating the privileges conferred to their political and economic status in that system. Cultural theorists Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter likewise point out that under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism, the privileges of citizenship have been dissociated from the conditions of work, so that migrant workers may be denied



citizenship (or may have no desire to become citizens) while the economically dispossessed observe the erosion of their own rights protections (59). They characterize this situation as “the death of the citizen-worker subject” (58).<sup>7</sup> In light of these arguments, we may consider how the citizen-worker in composition or rhetoric locates its *civitas* in collective identities apart from the state. For example, Flower’s *Community Literacy* models how we might locate the force of engagement in existing local rhetorical networks and structures rather than in abstractions such as national identity.

Developing curricula oriented toward the citizen-worker allows compositionists to engage directly with the economic anxieties motivating the “worth it” debate without reproducing literacy myths that equate college attendance with economic advancement. Stemming from a notion of *civitas* that engages with our relations as workers, this tactic speaks to the potential for political solidarity among the precariat, a class of individuals characterized by chronic unemployment, underemployment, and limited control over the conditions of their “flexible” labor. In this way, rather than seeing postgraduation unemployment as an individual problem—as a condition reflecting a choice of major, academic performance, or institutional pedigree—our treatment of higher education becomes an engagement with both the potential privileges of a degree and its limits.

In addition to speaking to underlying economic anxieties, a citizen-worker orientation toward composition demands of us that we continually ask how our pedagogies prepare students for not only academic writing but also for the realities of the workforce, including how to resist and thrive. Rather than distancing the value of our work from the market logics that produce job-hungry “higher ed consumers,” composition should seek to influence the expression of these market logics. Such a citizen-worker perspective might be understood as a mode of inquiry for ourselves and our students, integrated into first-year composition or used to frame other modes of cultural inquiry, for example, by analyzing power relations embedded in the workplace in light of feminist or critical race theories. This perspective might include proposing to students that cultural analysis may inform how they situate themselves and their coworkers in moments of conflict or in advocating for their rights as workers.

Designing curricula that foreground the citizen-worker also means calling attention to literacy myths about education by acknowledging that college may be a necessary but not sufficient condition of employment. In order to speak to the complex relationship between education and employment, a curricu-

lum geared toward citizen-workers might invite local business, nonprofit, and labor leaders to participate in classroom conversations about the realities and challenges of work. Or students might be encouraged to identify and evaluate university resources for recent graduates and job-seekers. Likewise, recognizing that the economic is also political means responding to the "worth it" debate by pointing out that the underlying problematic—including the stagnation of middle wages, the casualization of labor—is influenced by specific political and social policies. As Thomas Piketty argues, "The history of inequality is shaped by the way economic, social, and political actors view what is just and what is not, as well as by the relative power of those actors and the collective choices that result" (20). By emphasizing that labor conditions and job opportunities are also linked to political choices, we refuse the market determinism that encourages people to reduce employment after college to choice of major.

Thinking about the citizen-worker as the subject of composition also encourages us to consider the ways in which our students are workers and how these roles influence their performance in our classes. In other words, we might conceive of a citizen-worker perspective in composition as an orientation toward student learning. In his analysis of "students who work" and "workers who study," Bousquet reveals an important gap in the public imagination of who attends college. His attention to students as workers puts in perspective matters of grade inflation and increased enrollments: people feel distinct anxiety about where and if they will get good jobs. This anxiety pushes students toward unsustainable workloads (academic and nonacademic) and demands of them higher productivity, including GPA. However, the undergraduate as exploited worker confronting a precarious labor market is absent from the analysis of commentators lamenting a lack of prepared students.

Reimagining the citizen-worker as the subject of composition might mean developing curricula that foster a citizen-worker ethos among students. We might accomplish this, as Scott and Victor Villanueva have advocated, by engaging with political economies of rhetoric and composition. For example, Scott, in *Dangerous Writing*, investigates how teachers' and students' work in the classroom is situated by economic logics, encouraging us to connect our analyses of students with material realities of their lived experiences. Or we might invite students into this inquiry by asking them to reflect critically on their relationship to work, as Scott and Robin Patric Clair advocate. The latter's *Why Work?* not only provides a resource for engaging with philosophy of work but also models a kind of engagement with students who coauthor the

text. Making the citizen-worker the subject of composition would mean encouraging students to examine how a sense of discrete “citizen” and “worker” domains are products of cultural rhetorics. For example, we might ask students to observe and analyze workplaces as cultural artifacts, asking how aspects of space, social convention, or other rhetorical structures affect how we see the workplace politically. But we might also examine how we maintain these discrete domains in how we structure our composition courses. In this way, while professional writing courses represent an opportunity to examine workplace relationships more directly, we should also consider how these aspects of professionalization infuse our work in first-year composition, digital media, and writing across the curriculum.

**Arguments that emphasize economic factors in the “is college worth it?” debate raise important questions about the social role played by the university and who we imagine ought to pursue higher education.**

Ultimately, the goal of a curriculum geared toward the citizen-worker would be to prepare students to enter the workforce conscious of how power relations (racial, gendered, classed, abled) bear on their understanding of themselves in rhetorical workplaces.

Arguments that emphasize economic factors in the “is college worth it?” debate raise important questions about the social role played by the university and who we imagine ought to pursue higher education. A sense of crisis hangs over this debate, exacerbated by the individualist terms of arguments for and against higher education and reproduced by the public’s or the commentariat’s failure to understand the problems facing higher education in historical context. As literacy advocates, we must learn to recognize and respond to the exigencies motivating this debate without reproducing the literacy myth discourses that lend themselves to divestment in higher education as a social good. With this, we should seek out ways to demonstrate that our work in the composition classroom is both culturally and economically valuable to students and the public at large. The question of whether college is “worth it”—in economic, political, and cultural terms—is too complex for the simple answers most often given in popular media. But those attempts offer insight into how the university and its functions are “invented” for the public. Scholars and teachers of literacy have a role to play in this debate as ambassadors of higher education but also as advocates for the individuals and communities that face unruly debt burdens, economic pressures, and a hostile job market. Understanding the public’s ambivalence toward higher education is an important step toward being better ambassadors and advocates. This also

means responding to problematic constructions of higher education and college students, including challenging narratives that rely on vague or spurious connections to economic products of college attendance. Accomplishing this goal may require more outspoken advocacy for composition's contribution to a critically thinking, public-minded workforce.

## Notes

1. By *commentariat*, I mean journalists, educators, politicians, and other figures who take up higher education interests in publications and public forums. Among the most prominent of these figures are Richard Vedder, David Brooks, and Charles Murray.
2. Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter define *precarity*: "The term refers to all possible shapes of unsure, not guaranteed, flexible exploitation: from illegalized, seasonal and temporary employment to homework, flex- and temp-work to subcontractors, freelancers or so-called self-employed persons. But its reference also extends beyond the world of work to encompass other aspects of intersubjective life, including housing, debt, and the ability to build affective social relations."
3. While advocates and opponents sometimes group postsecondary training with "college," the terms of this debate—is college worth it?—presume that college is fundamentally distinct from vocational or technical programs. Some speakers further oppose "college" and "community college," suggesting that the implicit question could be understood as "is attendance at a 'traditional' four-year university worth it?"
4. For example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that for recent college graduates ages twenty to twenty-nine the unemployment rate was 17.6% in October 2009.
5. For an example of doomsaying, see Steven Ward's "Machiavellian Guide to Destroying Public Universities in 12 Easy Steps." Paul Jay and Gerald Graff offer a level-headed review of anxieties and advocacy for vocationalism in their "Fear of Being Useful."
6. Toby cites a 2008 study by the Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, Strong American Schools and a 2004 report for the Department of Education written by Clifford Adelman. Notably, the question of the efficacy is contested among researchers, as Eric P. Bettinger and Bridget Terry Long report, "Students placed in remediation are more likely to persist in college in comparison to students with similar test scores and backgrounds who were not required to take the courses" (739).
7. Neilson and Rossiter's argument also calls to mind the problem of rhetorical agency posed by the deconstruction of the autonomous subject. While their commentary on the erosion of the relationship between citizenship rights and labor

certainly bears on our understanding of the viability of the citizen-worker for composition and rhetoric, the problem of the fragmentation and dispersal of citizen and worker roles (59-60) speaks to a larger problem in rhetorical theory, which has been taken up by Biesecker and Bizzell, among others.

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