The Value of English: Perspectives on the Economic Benefits of Studying English in High School

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This exploratory study investigates English education professors’ beliefs about the economic value of studying English language arts (ELA). In response to a 44-item, cross-sectional survey, 140 professors clarified their beliefs about which economic benefits are and should be offered in high school ELA classes; how ELA classes are and should be designed to deliver those benefits; how much curricular attention is and should be given to economic benefits compared to other components of ELA; and whether ELA’s economic benefits should receive more attention in the future. The article identifies patterns in professors’ thinking about the economic payoff of ELA. These patterns are read against five common models of ELA’s economic value. The article concludes with a discussion of what respondents’ answers suggest about competing conceptions of the organization and purposes of ELA and K–12 schools.

It is rare in a working environment that someone says, “Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday, but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood.”

—Common Core State Standards architect David Coleman, explaining why he wants English classes to emphasize analytical writing over personal writing (quoted in Shannon, 2014, p. 100)

David Coleman’s remarks about writing pedagogy and workplace demands ratify a popular argument that says K–12 schools in the United States are not doing enough to prepare students for the world of work; therefore, school subjects must be rebuilt around standards keyed to the demands of higher education and the workplace. Recently, this idea was ratified in the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which “focus[es] on the clear goal of fully preparing all students for success in college and careers” (Every Student Succeeds Act Overview, 2016). Given ESSA’s focus, college and
career preparation will likely remain a major goal for U.S. schools for some time to come, even in a post–Common Core landscape.

In the field of English education, some teachers and researchers reject the idea that curricula should be aligned more closely with the workplace. For instance, Bill Tucker (2011) argues that K–12 schools’ emphasis on future careers undermines efforts to address students’ current concerns. In English language arts (ELA) classrooms, Tucker writes, the discourse of college and career is “a discourse of a ‘dream deferred’” (p. 115). By downplaying students’ present interests and emphasizing the demands of the adult world, this discourse “distorts our vision of literacy and disheartens the students we actually teach” (p. 116). Other teachers and researchers, meanwhile, accept workforce training as a legitimate goal but see standardized learning as a poor match for an economy driven more and more by nonstandard knowledge. Developing this idea, Kylene Beers (2010) argues, “One way we rebuild a strong economy is to educate students so they are able to do this creative—innovative—work” (p. 350; emphasis in original). In English education, then, there are different views of the argument that school subjects should be aligned more closely with the economy.

Despite past and present efforts to tighten the connections between ELA and the world of work, little research exists on the relationship between the two fields. Few studies focus on the co-evolution of ELA and the economy or identify different views of what economic benefits, if any, English classes should deliver to students. Lacking information on this matter, those concerned about the direction of ELA are underprepared to support, alter, or oppose the field’s closer articulation with the economy. To address this gap, we—English teachers turned academic researchers—built the present study around the question, “What are different perspectives on the economic benefits of studying ELA in the United States’ high schools?” Although we are currently posing this question to additional groups (e.g., high school teachers and businesspeople), we first surveyed professors of English education and asked them about their views of ELA’s economic mission. Because professors of English education are tasked with clarifying and explaining to new teachers ELA’s disparate purposes, we reasoned, it made sense to survey professors in our initial foray into this investigation. Furthermore, we thought English Education’s audience could benefit from situating their stances with respect to the field’s economic mission within (or against) their colleagues’ beliefs.

This article proceeds as follows. First, we review literatures on the economic dimensions of public K–12 schools and ELA. In this review, we describe different perspectives on ELA’s economic benefits. Next, we explain
our methods for recruiting survey respondents and gathering and analyzing data. We then present our findings. Finally, we look back over our study and discuss what it reveals about competing visions of ELA and the economy.

In this study, English and ELA refer to the high school subject taught to mainstream students. Thus, we use English and ELA in the same general ways they are used in methods textbooks (e.g., Burke, 2015; Christenbury, 2006) and in histories of the field (e.g., Applebee, 1974; Myers, 1996). The group mainstream high school students, as we explain in the introduction to the survey, “does not include students whose disabilities or language needs place them in stand-alone classrooms like special education classrooms” (for the complete survey, see https://redcap.vcu.edu/surveys/?s=LfzmVG3Hpq). The economy refers to the meta-field of production, distribution, and consumption of limited goods and, as we note in the introduction to the survey, “economic benefits’ are skills and knowledge students might use to improve their economic position now or in the future.” Therefore, economic benefits might include ways of reading and writing valued by employers, as well as ways of reading and writing people can use to critique and transform the economy.

Before we begin, we wish to emphasize that we do not believe student success in school and in the world of work is simply a matter of classroom teaching and learning. Although dynamics within schools are important factors in student success, realities outside of schools, from income inequality to financial crises to racial exclusion, are at least as important as schoolwork in shaping students’ trajectories. Thus, the findings reported in the present study should be read against a background of complex social, political, and economic systems.

Public K–12 Schools, ELA, and the Economy

School and Economy

In the United States, public K–12 schools depend on and feed into local, state, and national economies in several ways. Public schools are funded by revenue generated largely through taxes. In exchange for public monies, schools agree to produce public goods including an educated, cohesive citizenry and a workforce more or less prepared to engage in typical forms of labor. This compact enabled the establishment of common schools in the nineteenth century (see Kaestle, 1985; Reese, 2011) and has informed public education ever since. Indeed, questions of the costs and economic outcomes of education were and are central to debates over competition with the USSR in the mid- to late twentieth century; Japan in the 1980s; and China, India,
and the rest of the world today. Thus, preparation of workers has always been a part—but only one part—of public education in the United States.

Although U.S. public schools are expected to prepare workers, writes Michael Apple (1995), schools and school subjects are “relatively autonomous” from the economy (p. 26). K–12 schools are autonomous from the economy insofar as they teach a good deal of knowledge that has no obvious or immediate economic payoff. As Coleman observes, few employers are interested in the kind of personal writing common to many ELA classes (see Shannon, 2014, p. 100). At the same time, schools’ autonomy is relative insofar as schools are expected to teach general knowledge (e.g., basic literacy) students can use later in the workplace. In this way, schools serve as “literacy sponsors” (Brandt, 2001, p. 17) that call and enable students to acquire economically efficient forms of reading and writing. Furthermore, schools are economic institutions insofar as they sort and select students for different positions in the economic order. Schools help produce economic hierarchies not only by offering academic training to privileged students and vocational training to underprivileged students (see Anyon, 1981; Bowles & Gintis, 1977), but also by ratifying the knowledge of the powerful and sorting students according to their control of that knowledge. In this way, students’ facility with the cultural forms of the powerful can help them win distinction in school and find a path to a good college and a good career (see Apple, 1995; Bernstein, 1996; Bourdieu, 1984). Although the preceding arguments are complex and warrant further discussion elsewhere, they make the same general point: ELA and other subjects are autonomous from the economy, but that autonomy is only relative.

Some influential groups and individuals argue the increasing costs of schooling can be justified if schools do more to prepare students for college and career. Among those who make this argument are figures from the center-left to the right of the political spectrum: Bill Gates and the Gates Foundation, Michelle Rhee and StudentsFirst, the Center on Reinventing Public Education, the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, and former U.S. secretaries of education including Margaret Spellings and Arne Duncan (for analyses of these figures’ arguments, see Au & Ferrare, 2015; Price, Duffy, & Giordani, 2015; Watkins, 2011). These groups and individuals argue that by using standards to bring curricula into closer relation to the world of work, the United States can transform its schools to prepare students to succeed in the global economy. Such arguments are routinely advanced in debates over education reform. However, these arguments raise a question central to the present study: What is and what should be the economic value of schooling, in general, and ELA, in particular?
Cultural Models: ELA and the Economy

Central to this article’s theoretical framework is the concept of cultural models, which, as defined by Dorothy Holland and Naomi Quinn (1987), are closer to schemas or images than they are to full, worked-out theories (see also Gee’s [2008] related concept of “Discourse models”). Cultural models of ELA’s economic benefits are views about how ELA does or does not offer skills and knowledge students might use to improve their economic position now or in the future.

In our survey, we asked professors of English education to consider five cultural models of ELA’s economic benefits. Each model circulates widely in the field and is featured implicitly or explicitly in literatures on English education (see below). Furthermore, each model evolves in complex interaction with other models. We asked professors to indicate the extent to which they think different models describe ELA’s economic benefits. These five models are an advanced skills model (ELA teaches advanced literacy skills required in higher education and in professional workplaces); a basic skills model (ELA teaches basic literacy skills required for most jobs); a new economy model (ELA helps students develop their creativity for jobs that emphasize innovation); a strong humanist model (ELA should not seek to deliver economic benefits); and a critical literacy model (ELA teaches students to analyze how economic systems shape human lives).

Advanced Skills

When ELA emerged as a major school subject in the 1880s, high schools mostly served students who were on trajectories through college and into professional work. Thus, ELA was charged at its founding with teaching students forms of literacy they would need in advanced fields of higher education and the professions (see Applebee, 1974; Berlin, 2003; Myers, 1996). This mission remains central to ELA and, over time, the field has changed along with higher education and the professions to develop advanced literacies driven more by analysis than by “recitation and report” (Myers, 1996, p. 63). Indeed, in many contemporary ELA classes, students are called not only to decode and summarize texts but also to critique arguments and compose new texts that make novel claims. The cultivation of such advanced skills is seen as necessary for work in college and the professions. One way advanced forms of reading and writing are taught in ELA is through the study of great literature. Initially, ELA classes emphasized Anglo-Saxon literature; later, amid debates over literary canons, they expanded their focus to take in literatures of more diverse cultural traditions (see Applebee, 1974; Myers, 1996).
By reading and writing about great literature, teachers hope, students can acquire advanced literacy skills as they develop the cultural understandings that can guide their work in college and professional fields.

**Basic Skills**

In the early twentieth century, many more working-class and lower-middle-class students entered public high schools. Seeking “social efficiency,” reformers worked to align high schools more squarely with the adult world—including the world of work—awaiting most students (see Kliebard, 1986; Reese, 2011). In this vision, ELA would attempt to achieve a general correspondence between classroom literacy and nonprofessional workplace literacy. As Myers (1996) argues, many workplace and classroom literacies of the twentieth century were organized around “decoding, defining, and analyzing” texts (p. 85). Thus, basic literacy skill came to be seen as the ability to read and write texts used in domains such as the nonprofessional workplace. By extension, a “basic skills” model of ELA’s economic value holds that basic literacy skills useful in nonprofessional workplaces are key economic benefits offered in ELA.

**New Economy**

Over the past 20 years, some teachers and researchers in ELA have argued that English teachers should do more to prepare students for work in the “new economy” (see Beers, 2010; National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2009; for a critique of these arguments, see Collin, 2014). In the new economy, advocates say, routine jobs such as factory work are automated or outsourced, and the remaining good jobs—such as positions in the fields of marketing, industrial design, and computer programming—require creativity and flexible thinking. As the authors of the NCTE (2009) policy brief *Literacy Learning in the 21st Century* explain, “Today, employees engage with a technology-driven, diverse, and quickly changing global economy that requires new and different skills. Literacy demands have changed along with these changes in society and technology” (p. 1). ELA teachers can assist students in meeting these demands by helping students develop their imagination and ingenuity. For example, some teachers prompt students to use digital tools to compose multimedia texts that combine elements from coursework (e.g., assigned texts), popular culture, and students’ lived experiences. According to the new economy model, the technological literacy and associative thinking required in such assignments are valuable assets in an economy driven by creativity and new knowledge.
Strong Humanism

The founding of ELA as a major school subject can be seen, in part, as a project of Romantic humanism (see Applebee, 1974). In the late nineteenth century, some humanists argued ELA promoted an Anglo-Saxon tradition that could stabilize a society upended by industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. In this view, then, ELA worked to support the economic order. Other humanists, however, argued ELA should not stabilize industrial society but should stand apart from or in opposition to it. Such humanists, then and now, contend ELA does not have and should not have a substantial economic payoff. Helen Small (2014) calls this position an “anti-instrumental” view of the humanities (p. 62; see also Davies, 1997). In sum, ELA’s tradition of Romantic humanism creates a tension in the field, pulling ELA both toward and away from the economy. In this study, “strong humanism” refers to a cultural model that positions ELA and the economy as standing in clear, if not total, opposition to each other.

Critical Literacy

While strong humanism construes ELA and the economy as separate fields, a more critical view sees the former as grounds from which to critique and change the latter. This “critical literacy” model of ELA assumes students can improve their economic positions through practices of reading and writing connected to projects of socioeconomic transformation. Critical literacies in ELA draw from a number of traditions, including strong humanism; Deweyan progressivism, which figures education as a process of socioeconomic reform; social reconstructionism, which calls for the rebuilding, not just the reform, of schools and socioeconomic orders (see Applebee, 1974; Reese, 2011); and Freirean critical praxis, which calls students to draw on the resources of their cultural groups to “rewrite the word and the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987). ELA teachers mobilize these critical resources and aim them at economic relations, for instance, when they emphasize questions of inequality raised in commonly taught books such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *A Raisin in the Sun* (for more examples of ELA lessons in critical literacy, see Christensen, 2000). By reading and writing from a critical stance, ELA teachers hope, students may come to understand and, ultimately, rectify social, political, and economic inequalities.

Despite its profile as a primarily cultural field, then, ELA can be seen as standing in relation to the economy. This relationship, however, is understood in terms of different cultural models: advanced skills, basic skills, new economy, strong humanism, and critical literacy. Although each of these
models is mobilized in current debates, it is unclear how prevalent any one model is today, how multiple models are combined or set against each other, or how these models are imagined to be operationalized in classrooms. These unknowns are examined in the present study.

Methods

To study how professors evaluate different models of ELA’s economic benefits, we sent a cross-sectional, exploratory survey to a sample of 348 English education faculty members, 140 of whom responded. These faculty members, who worked at postsecondary institutions located throughout the United States, were identified through their schools’ websites as full-time professors (i.e., tenured, tenure-track, or clinical professors) who run and/or teach core classes in their schools’ English education programs. All research design and sampling procedures were approved or exempted by an institutional review board.

The Instrument

For our study, we designed and electronically administered a 44-item survey. As our research topic has not received sustained attention from researchers, we approached our study in an exploratory manner. An exploratory survey can be useful when beginning inquiry into a topic, as the data it produces can serve to guide future research (for more of this argument, see Babbie, 1990). Furthermore, we designed our survey to be cross-sectional, as we wished to produce a single-time description of English education professors’ beliefs regarding ELA’s economic benefits.

The survey began with an introduction outlining the purpose of our study, key definitions (e.g., the definition of “economic benefits”), and general instructions. The latter were repeated at the top of each page of the survey. We divided the survey into five basic sections, three of which were presented in matrices. We chose a matrix format for its efficiency and because items had repeated response scales (see Babbie, 1990). Where we divided sections into subsections, we presented related subsections in close proximity for increased comparability and visual processing (see Babbie, 1990; Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). The majority of items functioned on a five-point Likert scale with a sixth, nonsubstantive option (“Have no opinion”) placed at the end of the scale rather than in the middle to encourage substantive responses (see Dillman et al., 2009).

Section 1 of the survey asked respondents to consider which economic benefits are currently offered in mainstream high school ELA classes in the
United States, as well as which benefits should be offered. Section 2 asked respondents how ELA classes are currently and should be designed so that students gain economic benefits. The third section asked how much attention ELA classes currently and should give to economic benefits compared to other traditional components of high school ELA classes. Section 4 asked respondents to predict the direction of the U.S. economy and, based on their responses, how much attention they believe should be given to economic benefits in high school ELA classes. Section 5 contained 15 demographic questions. At the end of each section, we provided respondents with an open-ended item allowing for additional comments.

Survey items reflect the five cultural models described above. For instance, Item 1 centers a basic skills model and asks to what extent “learning basic literacy skills required for most jobs” is an economic benefit for high school ELA students. Item 4, in contrast, centers a critical literacy model and asks to what extent ELA teaches students to analyze how economic systems shape human lives. We designed the survey so each individual model is invoked in 8 to 10 survey items.

One limit of this study is that it does not account for differences among the types of ELA taught in well-resourced and under-resourced schools and in advanced, regular, and remedial classes. To keep the survey to a manageable length and a tight focus, we bracketed differences of class and academic level, as well as differences of race, ethnicity, region, and so forth. Although some survey respondents used open-ended items (e.g., Item 9) to note the importance of social difference, no meaningful patterns having to do with ELA and social difference emerged across respondents’ open-ended answers. In future studies, we plan to examine how economic benefits are delivered in classes of different levels and in differently resourced schools. These studies may reveal how the character and distribution of ELA’s economic benefits are shaped by sociocultural dynamics.

Pretest

Before administering the survey to our sample, we conducted a pretest to establish face and content validity. Both ensure that the instrument reflects an adequate and appropriate range of content (see Babbie, 1990). We emailed an early version of our instrument, containing additional open-ended items that allowed reviewers to provide suggestions and feedback, to 18 total respondents chosen primarily for their content expertise; each was either a professor of or doctoral student in literacy education. Thus, we conducted our pretest with a population similar to, albeit not fully representative of,
our intended sample (on the feasibility of surveying different populations during pretest phases of studies, see Babbie, 1990).

The pretest had a 100% return rate, and we found adequate variability across the closed-ended items. Suggestions for clarification in the open-ended items resulted in minor language changes on some of the items, but otherwise the final instrument resembled the version used for the pretest.

The Sample
We derived our sample from the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) list of accredited institutions (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2015). From this list, 252 schools from across the contiguous United States and Alaska formed the sampling frame. We selected an institution if it had at least one CAEP-recognized program in teacher education. Thus, we limited our sample to professors of English education who work in programs aligned at least partially with CAEP. By limiting our sample in this manner, we were able to survey professors who work in broadly similar programs (i.e., no respondents work in programs that overtly reject CAEP standards). We recognize that by using CAEP membership as an inclusion criterion, we may have excluded professors from non-CAEP programs that use standards that are fairly similar to CAEP standards.

We searched each school’s website to locate the names and contact information of English education professors who formed the sample of 348 potential respondents. Next, we emailed to each faculty member an introductory letter indicating the purpose and background of the study. Shortly thereafter, we administered the survey via REDCap, an online survey platform. Forty percent (N = 140) of the respondents completed the survey. Respondents’ ages ranged from 32 to 76 years, with the average respondent being 53 years old (SD = 10.91). Respondents had an average of 15.29 years of experience teaching in a college setting (SD = 10.90) and 8.86 years in a K–12 setting (SD = 7.52). The majority of respondents identified as female (65%), middle or upper-middle class (93%), and Caucasian (89%). Ninety-four percent currently hold either a PhD or EdD, and more than half (66%) work in a postsecondary institution with 15,000 or fewer students.

Two additional demographic items asked respondents what percentage of their time they spend either teaching or researching. The eight-point Likert scale was anchored with 0% = 1 and 91–100% = 8, with each point between representing roughly a 15% increment. Respondents reported spending an average of 46–60% of their time teaching (M = 5.31, SD = 1.72) and 16–30% of their time on research-related activities (M = 3.17, SD = 1.33). No statisti-
cally significant correlations were found between survey items and race, nor were any found between survey items and age, teaching experience, or percent of time spent teaching or researching.

Data Analysis

We analyzed data using SPSS 22. Analyses, including cross-analyses between “currently” and “should” items, were purely descriptive due to our study’s exploratory nature, the inability to satisfy chi-square assumptions with our current sample, and the power limits required to run multiple paired-sample t-tests. Cronbach’s alpha reliability for the entire instrument was 0.75.

Initial data analysis evaluated patterns of missing data and checked for outliers. Little’s Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) test with expectation maximization did not reject the null (p = .789), which suggests MCAR data or at least provides evidence against missing not at random (MNAR) data. Non-substantive responses (e.g., “Have no opinion”) were treated as user-specified missing data and not included in Little’s test, which evaluated only system-missing data. We checked for outliers by running frequencies with every item and verifying that no data were outside of the possible range of the response scales.

Fifty-nine respondents (42%) provided comments in at least one of the additional comment fields. The median number of comments per respondent who completed at least one entry was two out of five possible comments. To analyze comments, we took an inductive thematic approach (see Boyatzis, 1998). After reading, rereading, and coding each comment, we searched for themes evoked in at least five comments across the survey (an average of at least one comment per survey section). Taking this tack, we identified four repeated themes: “critical literacy/economic critique can play a limited role in ELA classes,” “over-testing complicates efforts to deliver ELA’s economic benefits,” “economic benefits should not be the driving force behind English curricula,” and “economic benefits should be delivered indirectly in ELA classes.” Given the relatively small number of comments the survey yielded (compared to the larger number of multiple-choice answers), we discuss repeated themes in such a way as to illustrate or explain our quantitative findings.

Our analysis focused on central tendencies across survey responses. Specifically, we focused on means and standard deviations in our data. By taking this approach, we could not track smaller patterns in our data that might reveal different, nondominant clusters of belief. We plan to investigate alternate beliefs about ELA’s economic value in future studies based around in-depth interviews with professors, teachers, students, and parents.
Results

What ELA’s Economic Value Is and Should Be

As shown in Table 1, respondents generally agreed that mainstream high school ELA in the United States is currently set up to deliver some form of economic benefit. Twelve respondents (approximately 9%) strongly disagreed with at least one of the four items, but no respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with all four (which would have indicated a belief that ELA has no economic payoff). Respondents agreed most \( (M = 4.64; 93.4\% \text{ agreement}) \) that the economic benefits of studying English currently include learning basic literacy skills required for most jobs. They agreed least \( (M = 3.32; 46.6\% \text{ agreement}) \) that economic benefits include learning to analyze how economic systems shape human lives. The latter item also showed the most variability in responses \( (SD = 1.23) \), with 29.4% indicating disagreement and 24.1% responding that they both agree and disagree. On balance, however, people agreed—or at least did not mostly disagree—that each type of economic benefit is delivered in some way in ELA classes.

When asked which economic benefits should be offered in ELA classes, respondents again indicated general agreement across items, and at a higher rate than when asked which benefits are currently being offered. Only one person strongly disagreed with any of the items, and only one rejected the very idea that ELA should be set up to deliver some kind of economic benefit (by disagreeing with all four). This particular respondent clarified his response by stating he did not believe that any of the listed benefits necessarily “guarantees a student’s economic gain.” Respondents agreed most \( (M = 4.79; 97.1\% \text{ agreement}) \) that the economic benefits of studying English should include learning basic literacy skills required for most jobs. Overall, people agreed or strongly agreed that different types of economic benefits should be delivered in ELA classes.

Respondents agreed least \( (M = 4.32; 83.2\% \text{ agreement}) \) that economic benefits should include learning to analyze how economic systems shape human lives. Responses to this item also showed the most variability \( (SD = 0.92) \), with one strongly disagreeing, 5.1% indicating disagreement, and 10.9% responding that they both agree and disagree. As with the other types of benefits listed in this subsection, however, most people indicated ELA classes should teach economic analysis in some way.

Questions of whether and how ELA classes should teach economic critique elicited several comments in Section 1’s open-response field (Item 9). A theme evoked in several of these comments was “critical literacy/economic critique can play a limited role in ELA classes.” This theme was apparent in six of 37 comments in Item 9 and in one comment in Section 2.
One commenter who both affirmed and limited the place of critical literacy in ELA stated, “If a teacher wants to adopt a social justice approach to studying literature, that would help on #4 and #8 [i.e., questions about economic critique], but it shouldn’t be required.” One of the more affirmative commenters said, “I believe English courses should help students learn to analyze how any system (economic, social, gendered) shape[s] human lives.” Although this person endorsed economic analysis, they asserted the latter must share time in ELA classes with other kinds of systemic analysis (e.g., analysis of social systems and gendered systems). One of the more doubtful commenters noted, “There is the danger of political indoctrination that should be kept out of the high school curriculum.” Notably, this respondent called indoctrination a “danger,” not a necessary outcome of critical literacy. Although the respondent rejected indoctrination, not critical literacy itself, this comment raises serious questions about the teaching of critical literacy in English classes. While these comments explain seven respondents’ mixed feelings about a critical literacy model of ELA’s economic benefits, they only suggest why other respondents might support or oppose economic critique in the ELA classroom.

All in all, across both of Section 1’s subsections (currently and should), respondents agreed most that learning basic literacy skills is currently and should be an economic benefit offered in ELA classes. One respondent explained, “Students should enter high school already having acquired basic literacy skills. However, where there are gaps in those basic skills, they need to be filled regardless of the age or educational level of the students.” The rate of agreement decreased progressively with each of the subsequent benefits: learning advanced literacy skills, developing creativity for jobs that emphasize innovation, and learning to analyze how economic systems shape human lives. Nevertheless, responses remained on the positive end of the scale for every item in both subsections. Items in the should subsection consistently had more “strongly agree” responses than their currently counterparts, suggesting that while respondents are in agreement that mainstream secondary ELA classes are currently set up to deliver a number of economic benefits to some extent, they should perhaps be doing more of it.

How ELA’s Economic Value Is and Should Be Delivered

Respondents agreed most ($M = 5.82$; 67.1% agreement) that high school English classes are currently designed so economic benefits are delivered through reading and discussing literature such as fiction, poetry, and drama (see Table 2 below). They agreed least ($M = 5.46$; 51.9% agreement) that
Collin and Aschliman > The Value of English

Table 1. For High School Students, the Economic Benefits of Studying ELA Currently/Should Include...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>“Currently”</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>“Should”</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning basic literacy skills required for most jobs</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning advanced literacy skills required for jobs in fields that require a lot of reading and writing, such as law, journalism, and so forth</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing their creativity for jobs that emphasize innovation, such as Web design and advertising</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to analyze how economic systems shape human lives (e.g., through examples in novels and nonfiction texts)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Both Agree and Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

Table 2. ELA Classes Are Currently/Should Be Designed so Economic Benefits Are Delivered Through...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>“Currently”</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>“Should”</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading and discussing creative literature such as fiction, poetry, and drama</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading and discussing nonfiction</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying and discussing language usage</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Both Agree and Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

High school English classes are designed so economic benefits are delivered through studying and discussing language usage. The latter item also demonstrated the most variability in responses (SD = 1.08), with 2.3% strongly disagreeing, 20.3% disagreeing, and 25.6% indicating that they both agree and disagree. On average, however, most people indicated each of the practices listed in this subsection delivers economic benefits in some way.
When asked how ELA classes should deliver economic benefits, respondents generally indicated stronger agreement for each item compared to when asked how ELA classes currently deliver benefits. None of the respondents strongly disagreed with any of the items of the should subsection, nor did any disagree across all four items. In the currently subsection, in contrast, respondents disagreed with several items. As one commenter who completed the open-response field (Item 18) explained, “I would like to think that these [practices] are all currently taught. However, evidence from my college sophomore composition classes leads me to believe writing and language use are not a current focus.” For this respondent and others, then, there is a real difference between how economic benefits are delivered and how they should be delivered in ELA classes.

A total of six of 36 responses (16.7%) to Item 18 cited the increased emphasis on standardized testing as a reason why classrooms are currently designed differently from how they should be designed. This theme, “over-testing complicates efforts to deliver ELA’s economic benefits,” also emerged in seven comments across Sections 1, 3, and 4. Answering Item 18, one respondent stated, “With the mania over test scores currently holding sway, I have grave doubts that English class for most students includes these activities [i.e., those noted in Items 10–17] at any depth.” Another commenter wrote, “If we want students to be career and college ready, then that money should be spent on more English teachers and not paying companies to implement and score a test.” Thus, although some reformers construe standardized tests as a means of ensuring students are prepared for college and career (see, e.g., Coleman, 2014; Duncan, 2013), some professors see standardized tests as obstacles to delivering ELA’s economic benefits.

Respondents agreed most ($M = 4.82$; 95.5% agreement) that ELA classes should be designed so economic benefits are delivered through writing. They agreed least—albeit still quite positively ($M = 4.52$; 88.9% agreement)—that ELA classes should be designed so economic benefits are delivered through reading and discussing literature such as fiction, poetry, and drama. This item also showed the most variability in responses ($SD = 0.77$), with 3% disagreeing and 8.1% responding that they both agree and disagree. However, as with the other items in this subsection, respondents agreed more often than not that the study of literature should deliver some type of economic benefit.

On balance, respondents agreed that economic value is currently delivered in ELA classes through different practices. For each practice except “studying and discussing language usage,” the mean average fell somewhere between “both agree and disagree” and “agree.” However, responses were
more positive and consistent (indicated by smaller standard deviations) regarding how ELA classes should be designed. Here, mean responses were nearly one point greater on average, falling between “strongly agree” and “agree.” Respondents most strongly believed that ELA classes are less-than-optimally designed to deliver economic benefits through writing (only one respondent disagreed that writing instruction should be designed to deliver economic benefits, and zero strongly disagreed). One respondent specifically emphasized in an open-ended response that ELA classes should put more emphasis on “expository/argument” writing. Thus, several respondents could imagine ways of adapting common ELA practices to deliver economic benefits more effectively.

In their answers to questions in the first two sections of the survey, then, most respondents indicated they believe ELA currently delivers and should deliver economic benefits through the field’s key practices. As we argue below, these answers suggest most respondents reject a strong humanist model of ELA that says the field should have no substantive connections to the broader economy. But how much emphasis should economic benefits receive when compared to other aspects of ELA? It is to this question that we now turn.

**ELA’s Economic and Non-Economic Components**

The third section of the survey asked respondents to consider how much attention economic benefits currently receive and should receive relative to four other components of ELA: personal beliefs and development, literary traditions, political/civic knowledge, and new media studies. In the instructions for this section, we acknowledged the interconnections among the five components (economic benefits plus the other four). That is, we acknowledged that when teachers focus on one component (e.g., new media), they may address other components (e.g., personal development). However, for the purposes of the survey, we asked respondents to view each component as a separate entity and to consider how much attention each component currently receives and should receive in ELA classes.

As shown in Table 3, respondents generally indicated that other components of ELA classes currently receive more attention than economic benefits. Note that in this section, lower numbers indicate people believe economic benefits currently receive or should receive less attention than other components of ELA. Of the presented options, literary traditions and other cultural traditions were said to receive the most attention when compared to economic benefits, with a mean of 2.10 and only 10.7% of respon-
dents stating that economic benefits receive more or much more attention. Political/civic knowledge was said to receive the least attention compared to economic benefits, with a mean response of 2.50 and 18.6% of respondents stating that economic benefits receive more or much more attention. Thus, most people recognize an economic component of ELA, but they see that component as subordinated to other components.

When asked whether economic benefits should be given more attention than other components in high school ELA classes, respondents indicated that, on average, they should not. While responses were mostly located on the lower end of the scale, respondents indicated that new media studies should receive a little less attention than economic benefits when compared to the other three options ($M = 5.04$; 84.9% believe new media should receive the same or less attention compared to economic benefits). Some respondents, however, stated they found it difficult to separate new media studies from economic benefits. One respondent stated, “If more attention would be paid to new media, then economic benefits would also be enhanced at the same time.” Echoing this statement, another respondent wrote, “Attending to new media probably confers economic benefits.” For several people, then, the economic component of ELA is inextricably bound up with other components of the field.

Respondents also indicated that personal beliefs and development should receive more attention than economic benefits when compared to the other components ($M = 2.85$; 86.5% believe personal beliefs and development should receive the same or more attention compared to economic benefits). One respondent explained, “Economic benefits are, in my mind, secondary to personal and intellectual development—that is, if students develop personally and intellectually, then they will automatically gain an economic advantage, whereas the reverse doesn’t strike me as true.” Political/civic knowledge had the same percentage of agreement as personal beliefs and development, albeit with a mean of 2.94 due to a greater number of “much more” responses. On balance, however, people’s evaluations of these components were similar.

The means for both subsections of responses (currently and should) are similar, indicating that respondents believe economic benefits currently and rightfully get roughly the same or less attention than other components of ELA (except perhaps when compared to new media studies). Lower standard
deviations for the should subsection also indicate more consistent agreement. Respondents therefore believe that ELA is not and should not be primarily about jobs and economics, and when economic benefits are used as a measuring stick to decide how much attention other components receive, there should be a relatively even balance among components.

In Section 3’s open response field (Item 27), five of 22 respondents (22.73%) wrote comments that evoked a theme stated directly in one entry: “Economic benefits are important. That being said, economic benefits should not be the driving force behind English curricula.” Six other comments across Sections 1, 2, 4, and 5 evoked this same theme. In a response to Item 27, one commenter argued,

As painted currently, the purpose of school is to prepare a student for a specific job. While demonstrating the relevance of what is taught and learned to work situations is very important, doing so should not drive the curriculum or serve as primary motivation for learning the material. There is more to life than a job.

While this commenter argued economic benefits and general relevance are “important,” they cautioned against letting economic concerns “drive” ELA and distract students from other parts of life. Another commenter explained, “Measuring worth solely by economic benefits is dehumanizing and misleading.” Although this commenter made room for teaching that takes some, but not “sole,” account of the economic, they said the consequences of overemphasizing the economic are dire. This ambivalence about economic benefits is evident across responses.

| Table 3. ELA Classes Currently/Should Give More or Less Attention to Economic Benefits Compared to These Other Components of ELA Classes... |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Item                          | “Currently”     | “Should”        |
|                               | Mean           | SD              | Mean           | SD              |
| Personal beliefs and personal development | 2.25           | 0.99            | 2.85           | 0.72            |
| Literary traditions and other cultural traditions | 2.10           | 0.96            | 2.92           | 0.74            |
| Political/civic knowledge     | 2.50           | 1.06            | 2.94           | 0.66            |
| Studying new media (e.g., digital texts) | 2.40           | 1.00            | 3.04           | 0.65            |

Note: 1 = Much Less; 2 = Less; 3 = The Same; 4 = More; 5 = Much More
The Future of the Economy and ELA’s Economic Value

On a scale of 1–5, where 1 was “a lot worse” and 5 was “a lot better,” respondents indicated they believe that job security and pay in the United States over the next 20 years will be, on average, worse (\(M = 2.17, SD = 0.98\)). Fifty-seven respondents (43.5%) believe job security and pay will be a little worse; 53 (26.7%) think they will be a lot worse; 21 (16%) think they will hold steady; and 18 (13.7%) think they will be a little better. No respondents believe job security and pay will be a lot better. One respondent said, “Job security may be worse as technology replaces people and as workers may need to be wiser on how to keep or change with one’s occupation.” Whatever economic benefits ELA delivers, people predicted, those benefits will be more difficult to realize in the near future.

When asked to use their prediction to consider how much more or less attention economic benefits should receive in high school English classes over the next 20 years, respondents indicated that economic benefits should receive the same or more attention (\(M = 3.80, SD = 0.86\)). Although these respondents said economic benefits should receive more attention than they received in the past, they did not say economic benefits should receive more attention than personal beliefs and development, cultural traditions, or civic knowledge. Sixty-three respondents (47.7%) think that economic benefits should receive more attention than they received in the past; 55 (26.5%) believe they should receive the same amount; 26 (19.7%) say much more; 6 (4.5%) say less; and two (1.5%) say much less. Explaining why economic benefits should receive more attention in the future, one respondent stated, “I believe the job force will be shifting in the next 20 years and the economic benefits for those jobs are not currently being addressed in most English classrooms.”

Although many respondents said economic benefits should receive more attention, 10 commenters argued in open responses (Item 30) that ELA teachers should not give too much direct attention to economic benefits. This theme—“economic benefits should be delivered indirectly in ELA classes”—was evoked in seven more comments across Sections 2, 5, and 5. One commenter wrote, “Economic benefits are not necessarily gained through directly teaching them. Rather, there are intangible skills, values, and ideas that come through the study of literature, history, and philosophy that lead indirectly to economic, social and personal benefits.” Developing this theme, another commenter described the intangible skills taught indirectly in ELA classes:
Some of the economic benefits of English class are dispositional and not a matter of applying specific skills or using work-related materials. Using one’s imagination, getting interested in complex problems of expression or interpretation, feeling comfortable collaborating with others in solving such problems, and realizing that accepting an intellectual challenge will result in insight might help form habits and values that could be helpful in any craft or profession.

Taking this argument further, another commenter said the kinds of dispositions taught indirectly in ELA classes are more economically valuable in the long run than are the kinds of skills taught directly in career-focused programs:

Education and English help develop lifelong learners so we need thinkers who will eventually become earners, but they must have adaptability, resourcefulness, and tenacity to fit into the exponentially changing future. Educating for economic gain tends to focus on the immediate return on investment instead of the long haul.

Thus, for several commenters, the subordination of economic benefits to other aspects of ELA makes good economic sense: the intangible skills and dispositions important to much work in the current economy and the economy of the near future are best taught and learned indirectly.

**Discussion**

The above findings suggest that, on balance, English education professors work out and mobilize a “weak humanist” model of ELA’s economic benefits. Unlike the strong version of the model, weak humanism endorses some kind of connection between ELA and the economy. Like the strong version, however, weak humanism privileges the self and culture over other components of the field. Respondents recognized a connection between ELA and the economy by agreeing ELA classes should deliver different kinds of economic benefits (see Table 1). Respondents weakened this connection by indicating economic benefits should receive less attention than other aspects of ELA (e.g., personal beliefs and literary traditions; see Table 2). In sum, a weak humanist view of the field says the economic is a component of ELA, but not a central component.

This weak humanist vision of ELA may be read, following Fredric Jameson (1981), as “an imaginary resolution of a real contradiction” (p. 77). The “real contradiction” in this case is the tension between ELA’s humanist logic and secondary education’s instrumental logic. While ELA and second-
ary education feature multiple logics, humanist and instrumental logics are central to their respective fields. As noted above, ELA is connected to a Romantic humanist tradition that is, at best, uneasy about the human costs of industry and commerce. At the same time, ELA is situated in secondary education, a field with instrumental aims including workforce preparation. Weak humanism resolves this contradiction by accepting the economic, but subordinating it to the personal and the cultural. This resolution is only imaginary, however, in that it eases conceptual tensions, not material, institutional dilemmas faced in practice by real English teachers. It is up to teachers to mobilize, adapt, or reject weak humanism as they seek to meet the competing aims of their content area and their schools.

What, then, are the terms of this weak humanist resolution? How should economic concerns be addressed in the ELA classroom? Several commenters explained that economic benefits should be delivered indirectly through engagement with the personal and the cultural. That is, ELA teachers should not carve out small amounts of time here and there to focus directly on the economic. Further defining weak humanism, respondents said schools should not maintain testing regimes that take over instruction and aim learning too directly at college and career. Instead, commenters explained, ELA teachers should make sure that their modes of teaching literature and writing foster general habits valued in many workplaces. Thus, teachers can attend to the economic without abandoning traditional practices of ELA for practices of direct worker training. In this way, contra Coleman, the weak humanist model says writing “a compelling account of your childhood” can indirectly help you develop the analytical and expressive skills you need to write “a market analysis.”

Notably, respondents indicated that ELA can deliver different economic benefits in different ways. As shown in Table 1, respondents agreed or strongly agreed ELA should teach basic and advanced literacy skills, new economy creativity, and critical literacy. As shown in Table 2, respondents agreed or strongly agreed economic benefits should be delivered through each identified classroom practice (i.e., reading literature and nonfiction, writing, and studying language usage). They agreed most that economic benefits should be delivered through writing instruction. This result is broadly consistent with Brandt’s (2014) finding that many employers and workers see writing as an increasingly important part of work in an economy that is powered more and more through the production of texts (and especially...
digital texts). Thus, respondents indicated that as long as ELA classes can deliver economic benefits indirectly, ELA’s typical classroom practices are rich and flexible enough to deliver different kinds of benefits. According to a model of weak humanism, then, ELA teachers need not change or add to the field’s core practices.

Given how weak humanism seeks to conserve ELA’s core practices, some respondents may ratify this model less out of a commitment to the model’s principles and more out of a desire to hold off attempts to transform the field. That is, in answer to calls for ELA to emphasize basic workplace literacy or new economy creativity, some respondents may say, “ELA already does that, but indirectly. No need to change anything.” Hints of this strategy are evident in respondents’ agreement that ELA classes should teach new economy creativity (see Table 1) and skepticism that a new economy replete with good jobs will arrive anytime soon (see Item 28). If few students will go on to work new economy jobs, why should ELA teachers emphasize new economy creativity in the classroom? Some respondents may believe that while new economy arguments are inaccurate (as borne out in U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013), they can be used to promote creative teaching and hold off standardization. That is, as Ken Jones (2010) argues, while new economy arguments rest on a questionable economic forecast, they

serve for some who work in education as a means of critiquing the present [i.e., excessive standardization], as a route towards re-engagement with central issues about culture and learning, and thus as a means of re-encountering potentially useful traditions [i.e., progressive education] that for two decades have tended not to be drawn upon. (p. 21)

At the same time, some respondents may believe a new economy is unlikely to arrive, but may reason that because ELA already fosters creativity through its core practices, ELA may as well take credit for developing skills valued in a small number of workplaces. Although there is some evidence in our findings to support this speculation, the latter must be confirmed or denied through further study.

Significantly, the weak humanism endorsed by respondents allows for critical literacy but rejects “strong left” versions of the latter. In our survey results, support for strong left versions of critical literacy would have shown up in (a) more “strongly agree” responses to Item 8’s statement that ELA should help students “analyze how economic systems shape human lives” and (b) more “strongly disagree” responses for the other items in Section 1 that stated ELA should teach literacy skills useful in paid work.
Most respondents said ELA might emphasize economic critique a little more, but not so much more that critique overshadows other parts of the field, including the teaching of literacy skills useful in workplaces. This idea was affirmed in several comments across the survey that invoked the theme “critical literacy/economic critique can play a limited role in ELA classes.” However, as indicated in the comparatively high standard deviation of responses to Item 18’s statement that ELA should promote economic critique ($SD = 0.92$), it is clear that many respondents oppose or have mixed feelings about pursuing such investigations in ELA classes. As one commenter wrote, “There is the danger of political indoctrination that should be kept out of the high school curriculum.” In this humanist formulation, critical literacy becomes dangerous when it encroaches on students’ personal freedom to make up their own minds. Thus, contrary to the warnings of conservative commentators such as George Will (2006) who see education professors as propagators of leftist ideologies, respondents to our survey tended either to question critical pedagogy in ELA or to endorse limited forms of critical literacy that do not interfere with other aspects of the field. By the same token, critical scholars of education may be mistaken if they believe most others in the field support a broad reorientation of ELA toward socioeconomic critique.

Ultimately, by acknowledging economic benefits as indirect outcomes of English education, teachers can (a) respond to the demands of education reformers who want to align education more squarely with the world of work and (b) maintain ELA’s integrity as a field that focuses on the personal and the cultural. However, as Bourdieu (1984) writes, indirect instruction (e.g., some forms of progressive instruction) can reproduce social hierarchies by sorting students according to their ability to decipher information—from content knowledge to behavioral cues—coded in the language of the powerful. Thus, while weak humanism can help protect ELA’s integrity, it might further marginalize the marginalized by making it difficult for underprivileged students to acquire economically efficient literacies. The field, therefore, is split by another contradiction between humanist values (i.e., the economic should be subordinated to the personal and the cultural) and democratic principles (i.e., no one should be advantaged or disadvantaged by their backgrounds).
No obvious resolution to this contradiction is apparent at this moment. By working to resolve this tension, teachers, students, professors, and parents will reshape ELA and reorient the field in relation to the economy.

Looking Ahead

Besides addressing a gap in the research literature, the present study offers ideas that might be useful to those engaged in debates over ESSA and other initiatives that seek to link ELA more tightly to the economy. To resist or change such initiatives, people must identify, adapt, and mobilize cultural models that construe ELA as more than an arena for workforce development. Crucially, however, even the most interesting and dynamic model of ELA is worth little in political debates if it cannot draw much support. Without broad support, a given model stands little chance of getting ratified in policy and materialized in schools. Thus, readers might reflect on the findings of the present study and ask, “Of the models or elements of models we endorse, which are shown in the study to stand a chance of winning the support of important stakeholders?” As described above, many professors of English education support a model of weak humanism that conserves core ELA practices and allows for new media literacy and indirect workforce preparation. Researchers might conduct further studies to see if this model or other models are popular with other key stakeholders, including parents, students, and businesspeople. By creating attractive models of ELA and assessing the popularity of these models, educators and researchers can work to build consensus among groups to rethink ELA for challenging times.

Notes

1. Although important works in literacy studies examine the economic dimensions of literacy (e.g., Brandt, 2001; Graff, 1979; Street, 1984), few studies of economics and literacy focus on ELA as a specific domain in which literacy is taught.

2. Although college and career readiness is now a goal for elementary as well as secondary education (see, e.g., Every Student Succeeds Act Overview, 2016), we focused the present study on high school education so as not to ask respondents to assess together the needs of younger and older students who stand in different relations to the job market. Respondents may have found it difficult to identify the economic benefits that ought to be delivered to five-year-olds just beginning school and 18-year-olds who may be about to leave school for full-time work or higher education.

3. We began this project in 2015, when the list of institutions accredited by NCATE/CAEP was still updated and provided under the NCATE banner on NCATE’s website. As NCATE is now folded fully into CAEP, we refer to the latter in the present study to avoid confusion.
References


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