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OPINION: Let's not turn community colleges into just workforce development

Workforce training funds from the Biden administration are welcome, but not at the expense of a well-rounded education

by TERRY O'BANION July 8, 2021

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Every community college leader in the nation is thrilled that President Joe Biden is calling on their institutions to play a leading role in training the workforce of the future. More than any past administration, Biden and his Democrat colleagues understand the central position of community colleges in sustaining U.S. economic vitality.

The amount of funds provided for job training in community colleges by the federal government in the last few years and the potential for additional funding under the Biden administration is staggering: In his first speech to Congress in April, Biden said he wants to spend \$109 billion to make two-year colleges free, an additional \$80 billion on Pell Grants and \$62 billion for retention and completion efforts — along with another \$39 billion for two free years at minority-serving institutions.

By all means, Biden is following through on a point he began making in 2014, that community colleges should be vehicles for training the workforce of the future. Yet there is another point Biden may be in danger of missing: If our education system hopes to fully prepare citizens for our democracy — for a just society that supports equally the social and economic imperatives of the nation — a liberal education must be supported as strongly as job training programs.

But where will those funds for liberal education come from? Compared to the billions being spent and proposed for job training, the federal government has only been providing about \$150 million annually for the National Endowment for the Humanities and a similar amount for the National Endowment for the Arts — something former President Donald Trump wanted to stop funding entirely.

Is there any educator, parent, legislator, pastor, entertainer, farmer, housekeeper or industrialist who will disagree with the statement, “We want an education that will help our students make a good living and live a good life”?

Intoxicated by the huge amounts of new funding, community college leaders are expanding their job training programs with lightning speed. And it is entirely appropriate that they do so, because community colleges have the experience, philosophy, structures, partnerships, faculty and locations to be the nation's primary engine to prepare students for the workforce we need. Every community college leader understands and agrees that training the workforce is one of the most important roles played by community colleges.

But workforce training should not preclude preparing students in other ways. Not only do the liberal arts help us live better lives, they prepare us to be informed citizens who protect the basic tenets of our democracy — a social need of great importance in today’s world. In the final analysis, liberal education is designed to liberate us from ignorance.

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For over 100 years, community colleges have been addressing the social and economic needs of the nation. During the 1950s and ’60s there was general agreement that community colleges should be comprehensive and serve the multiple needs of diverse student bodies.

In the past few decades, though, that perceived purpose has been changing, with workforce education more often seen as community colleges’ highest priority. If workforce training does in fact become the primary purpose of the community college, the humanizing effects of a liberal education will be lost or relegated to such a low priority that we will sell our students and our society short, leading to a decline in the number of well-educated students and of our democracy and economic vitality.

Is there any educator, parent, legislator, pastor, entertainer, farmer, housekeeper or industrialist who will disagree with the statement, “We want an education that will help our students make a good living and live a good life”?

A liberal education exposes individuals to ideas and opportunities that help them explore the human condition. It helps students examine a vast array of possibilities on their way toward identifying their own dreams, honing their own talents and fulfilling their own goals. The value of a liberal education lies in its ability to help individuals achieve their full potential — which has long been a basic principle of American education.

We study history to understand where we come from and to help us not repeat mistakes of the past. We explore the human experience in all its varieties through literature and the humanities and learn to appreciate the diversity of human thought and creativity. We study philosophy and religion to better understand our own values and those of others. We study the social and physical sciences to learn about the world around us and within us.

If we cannot figure out a way to maintain and bolster liberal education within the community college curriculum — a curriculum that will prepare all students to make a good living and live a good life — the community college we know today may cease to exist, and the community college we dream of for the future may never come to be.

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