
Regional

Higher education needs to listen better

I remember once talking to the head of a large engineering firm who told me that he preferred hiring engineers with a strong background in the liberal arts because they were capable of thinking “outside the box.” And I have often used that anecdote to support the notion of a liberal arts education – something that I have long championed.

Now it seems that such an anecdote, far from being an oddity, is becoming part of conventional wisdom.

Because higher education in the United States has been living historically out of touch with society, we tend to be oblivious to what the general public thinks about us. But that has been changing lately, especially because of increased criticism by politicians and the skyrocketing level of debt among college students

A little more than a year ago, Northeastern University, a private, not-for-profit institution located in Boston, conducted a public opinion survey of 1,000 American adults that included a significant number of people who make hiring decisions for their companies. The results were quite interesting in more than one way.

The outcomes of that survey, published under the title “Innovation Imperative: Enhancing Higher Education Outcomes,” showed that Americans believe in higher education but are concerned about the system’s ability to prepare graduates for success in today’s workforce.

One of the current fads in higher education – promoted by both politicians and university administrators with a superficial view of the world – is that all we need

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

are more graduates with STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) degrees. Yet those surveyed thought that what we really need are graduates with skills that are useful no matter a student’s major or career plan.

What Americans are demanding –and for good reason – are more people with skills in communication (verbal and written), problem solving abilities and creative and critical thinking. What they are saying is that we need to produce more well rounded individuals.

Americans think that experiential learning, meaning more hands-on education, is extremely important. After all, what you learn by memorizing you tend to forget, while what you learn by doing you tend to remember. That is why they show a declining confidence in online education, which delivers mostly content but not necessarily skills. They also have serious doubts about the MOOCs (massive open online courses) to solve the problems of higher education.

This is an important point given that study after study has shown that online education does not prepare students as well as face-to-face instruction. Even hybrid courses, where there is a combination of online content and personal experience with a professor, are

better than pure online delivery alone.

The American public seems to intuitively “get it.”

Contrary to some claims that higher education is not worth the effort and money, the majority of Americans agree that college education is extremely important. Three in four Americans believe a college degree is more important today than it was for their parents’ generation. Almost seven in 10 believe a college degree will be even more important for the next generation. There is a strong conviction that educational level is the most important factor in determining a candidate’s success in today’s job market.

Yet that does not mean that people think that the current system is doing the job. Nearly half of all Americans say colleges are not in tune with today’s job market and are not preparing graduates accordingly. In fact, there is a widespread and growing agreement that the American system of higher education must change.

But what changes are needed? To begin with, we have to move away from the idea that degrees are just about memorized knowledge. There is no question that we all need more literacy about different subjects, but it is equally important to know what to do with that knowledge. That is where experiential learning comes in, with the more hands-on experiences the better. One way to increase that type of learning is by offering our students more internship opportunities. They are not only an extremely valuable teaching

tool, but also provide unique opportunities for people to test their real call in the modern world. They also allow for a higher level of networking that can help students land a job.

But who should be making sure that these necessary changes take place? This public opinion poll shows that this must be a shared responsibility. Americans believe that postsecondary institutions, employers and students have equal responsibilities in this undertaking.

To that end, colleges and universities need to get out of their cocoons and have more widespread and in-depth conversations with local employers. That is particularly true for comprehensive universities. By the same token, they must make sure that skills in the areas of communication, critical thinking, problem solving and the like are reinforced. These skills are exactly what students get from disciplines in the liberal arts areas, such as communication, philosophy and the natural sciences.

If we want to be more in tune with societal needs while also enhancing support for higher education, we have to listen to our audience. Otherwise we will continue living in a bubble while lack of public support (financial and otherwise) for what we do keeps eroding.

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