

---

## Regional

---

# Academia needs to be more of a leader

One of the least appreciated realities about U.S. prosperity throughout its history is the role played by the federal and state governments, industry and higher education working in concert. These partnerships and investment in research have taken place during both good and bad economic times.

It was during the Civil War that Congress passed the first Morrill Land-Grant Act in 1862, forging a partnership between the federal government, the states, higher education, and industry aimed at creating universities capable of extending educational opportunities to the working class while conducting the applied research to enable American agriculture and industry to become world leaders. The results of that partnership couldn't have been more impressive. It resulted in major progress in agriculture and manufacturing that catapulted this country into a position of world economic leadership.

During and after World War II –particularly after the Sputnik shock of 1957– Congress acted once again to strengthen this partnership by investing heavily in basic research and graduate education, which resulted in the creation of the world's finest research universities. These schools not only provided the nation with a significant number of well-prepared graduates, but also contributed a myriad of scientific and technological innovations to society.

Among the great achievements of that era were putting a man on the Moon, the development of the Internet and advances in public health that increased the human life span to theretofore unimaginable levels.

Yet, despite all that progress, the U.S. is witnessing

## Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

today new challenges that are coming at a time of rapid and profound economic, social and political transformation. Add to that the global competition we are facing. We rank ninth in the world in the percentage of a nation's population that has a college degree. This comparative sliding in the proportion of Americans with a college degree puts the U.S. in a weak position when it comes to innovation, which in turn threatens our long-term economic progress, our national security and international prestige.

Both in 2005 and 2009 a bipartisan group of members of the U.S. Congress tasked the National Research Council (NRC), an independent operating arm of the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering and the Institute of Medicine with determining what this country needed to do to maintain its position of world leader in science and technology.

The results of the NRC study have just been published in the form of a report titled "Research Universities and the Future of America: Ten Breakthrough Actions Vital to Our Nation's Prosperity and Security." Its recommendations could not be clearer: reaffirm and revitalize more partnership among the nation's research universities, federal government, states and industry. Otherwise, the report said, the future of the U.S. as a world leader in innovation will diminish, having seri-

ous effects on our economy.

Leaders in academia, industry, government and national laboratories representing a great diversity of backgrounds composed the NRC panel in charge of the report. They concluded that America's research universities are the key assets for our nation's future, but that their own future will depend upon the willingness of policy makers to act to strengthen the historic partnership that got us to where we are now.

Among the recommendations issued by the panel are (1) better funding of higher education by the federal, state and private entities, especially in the area of graduate education; (2) greater autonomy and fewer regulations to institutions of higher education so they can respond more swiftly to new opportunities; (3) greater partnerships with businesses; (4) better financial management of postsecondary institutions; (5) the development of clear strategies that identify key national priorities; (6) improving the pipeline of graduate students into the labor market; (7) more outreach efforts by higher education to share the benefits of science and technology among the general population; and (8) facilitate the participation of more international graduate students and scholars into the American higher education system.

I don't think that there will be any significant opposition to these recommendations from a rhetorical viewpoint. The problem is the state of decomposition of both the political system in general and management of higher education in particular.

We are living in a time of political gridlock that makes the federal system largely dysfunctional. That

is particularly true when it comes to budgets. The state system is not much better. Many states, in order to satisfy an irresponsible anti-tax populism, keep cutting higher education budgets, resulting in ill-funded post-secondary institutions and the limiting of public access to those institutions, particularly for the constituencies with the fewest financial resources.

Finally we are seeing how the leadership of (mostly) public institutions of higher education seem too content with just passing budget cuts down the line while not taking a more spirited defense of what universities mean for the well-being of local, state, and national communities. They also seem to show very little inclination to develop more creative partnerships with businesses. No wonder corporate America is doing more and more business abroad, to the detriment of our own economy.

We are not facing a crisis of lack of ideas, as the NRC report shows. What we are facing is the lack of appropriate leadership at multiple levels where incompetence, indolence and mediocrity appear to be widely accepted by the society at large.

Those of us who remember how the U.S. responded to the Sputnik challenge know that we have the capacity to overcome these difficulties. The question, given the political environment in Washington, is whether higher education leadership is going to take a more energetic and visionary stance for its own sake?

*Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is a writer and college professor with leadership experience in higher education. He can be contacted through his website at: <http://www.aromerojr.net>*