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Drastic education reforms would devalue mission and learning process

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By Aaron W. Hughey

Contrary to what has been suggested in recent decades by many self-proclaimed experts, higher education in the United States is not in any danger of becoming irrelevant.

While it might be true that colleges and universities could do a better job of realizing their core mission of teaching, research and service, a drastic overhaul would serve only to weaken the academy at a time when its importance to our collective future has never been more obvious.

Some even try to frame the debate in terms of who should have access to higher education, but the key question is not whether college is for everyone; of course it's not. It's more a matter of what students encounter once they arrive there.

Apparently there is a perception circulating in some influential circles that higher education's focus needs to be more vocational. Even President Barack Obama, in his State of the Union address, called for higher education to be more "accountable." Some interpreted his remarks as advocating "gainful employment" as the standard by which we should gauge institutional efficacy.

This perspective represents a gross misunderstanding of the president's remarks and suggests a course of action that, if vigorously pursued, would not be in our nation's best interest.

To be clear, colleges and universities have an inherent obligation to provide students with accurate and trustworthy information about their prospects for finding a suitable job in their selected field.

Still, students should be encouraged to follow their dreams as much as possible when choosing a major. It is difficult to be successful if you do not have a passion for the profession you are preparing to enter.

The goal of higher education should never be to prepare an individual for a specific career in a specific discipline. This approach shortchanges the true value of the learning process and will not serve to enhance our way of life.

Moreover, preparing students for occupations (or entire industries) that might not even exist in coming decades makes no sense.

In addition to relevant knowledge and skills, education should endow students with fundamental problem-solving and decision-making strategies that will allow them to effectively negotiate a rapidly evolving global environment.

There is little disagreement that society will increasingly need graduates who have solid backgrounds in science and engineering. What is less understood — yet no less important— is that we will also need graduates with extensive exposure to the humanities.

If colleges and universities do not emphasize literature, languages, philosophy and the arts at the same intensity as chemistry, biology and physics, everything human civilization has achieved is in danger of being lost.

Albert Einstein once said: "Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind." Once again, he was ahead of his time.

Another questionable interpretation of the president's speech involves the rather curious notion that higher education is somehow increasingly disconnected from the society it serves. The way to rectify this, according to some, would be to make the academy more "standards-based."

In other words, create a more elaborate and convoluted paper trail.

This approach inherently precipitates a learning environment more obsessed with credentialing than educating — and as any credible faculty member knows, there is a huge difference between these approaches to instruction.

Being able to document that students are provided with the requisite knowledge and skills that will empower them to be productive members of society is not the same as actually endowing them with those attributes.

Here's how the system used to work: If you earned an A in a class, the inference was you had mastered the content covered in that course. If we no longer can make that assumption — and there are many who think we can't — then we need to address the core problem instead of constantly wiring around the symptoms.

Creating complicated, tedious and ultimately useless accountability schemes to provide some assurance that an A actually means something constitutes a colossal waste of time, as well as a meaningless distraction from the real educational process.

The only way to truly fix higher education would be to get rid of the micromanagers, the gatekeepers and the checklist-wielding enthusiasts, and let the true experts navigate at will.

American higher education has been the envy of the world for almost 400 years. Hopefully. it will survive the latest assault by those trying to improve it.

Aaron W. Hughey is a professor of counseling and student affairs at Western Kentucky University. Reach him at Aaron.Hughey@wku.edu.

http://www.kentucky.com/2012/06/25/2236894/stick-with-the-basics-of-higher.html