



Higher education should better serve students, society

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“Though U.S. universities are envied around the world, conservatives want to reduce the flow of government cash to what they see as elitist, politically correct institutions that often fail to provide practical skills for the job market,” Kevin Sullivan and Mary Jordan noted recently in the Daily News.

When those of us who work in higher education hear this kind of criticism, our initial reaction is often to get defensive and start arguing that these characterizations are simply ill-informed and out-of-touch with what a college education is all about.

In my experience, however, where there is smoke it is often wise to at least look around for a potential fire. And if we are honest, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the flames are getting higher. Those of us in the academy bare a significant portion of the blame for where we currently find ourselves.

Higher education should be about developing three fundamental and inter-related competencies: technical expertise, human relations proficiencies and desire; i.e., the motivation to effectively combine the initial two aptitudes to solve technological as well as social problems. The efficacy of higher education inevitably comes down to how well these three bases are covered.

I believe contemporary higher education has focused too narrowly on technical competence. Although important, how well you know something is irrelevant if you do not have the skills or the inclination to work efficiently with and for others.

Society in general and employers in particular need graduates who have obviously mastered the content associated with their majors – but they also need graduates who know how to use that knowledge productively and amicably as they interact with colleagues.

If we truly want to create a better world, maybe we need to refocus our efforts on creating better – not just smarter – human beings.

Aaron W. Hughey
Bowling Green

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