

Colleges must focus more on helping graduates find jobs

BY AARON W. HUGHEY

For better or worse — and as economic realities continue to evolve in response to globalization, diversity and technology — higher education is increasingly seen as the only viable path to an enhanced quality of life for most citizens.

Last fall, Gov. Matt Bevin instructed the Council on Postsecondary Education to develop a funding model for public colleges and universities based on criteria such as degree completion percentages and number of majors in the STEM and health disciplines.

And while I applaud and support Bevin's assertion that colleges and universities need to do a better job of aligning educational programs with employer needs, my concern is that the initiative will address only the symptoms and not the underlying cause of a problem that is not limited to Kentucky.

Administrators now focus almost exclusively on recruitment and retention to graduation as the primary indicators of institutional efficacy. If institutions of higher education really want to be more responsive to societal needs, funding should be based on their graduates' placement rates in their field of study instead of student persistence or degree completion.

Enhancing the placement rate obviously begins by making sure incoming students are provided with accurate and reliable information on the employment status of alumni in their prospective majors. This would serve to align program offerings with projected needs in a more comprehensive and efficient manner.

As graduates complete their programs of study in higher numbers, it is imperative that colleges and universities take a more proactive approach to helping them secure jobs commensurate with the significant investment it takes to acquire a credential these days. No graduate should walk across the stage at commencement only to arrive at the unemployment (or the underemployment) line.

Midland College in Texas has it exactly right. "The Job Placement Office provides our students and graduates with opportunities for full- and part-time employment," says its website. "The office is designed to prepare, screen and refer qualified applicants to job openings."

Given the exponentially increasing cost of attending college these days, higher education needs to spend at least as much time and energy helping graduates secure jobs as recruiting and retaining them to graduation.

“We will do everything we can to find you a job related to your major after graduation and we will not stop until that happens” should be the mantra of every college career service center. In addition, faculty should see this as part of the inherent obligation to the students they serve.

Job-placement rates for a department should be a key factor in determining the compensation received by that department’s faculty. There’s accountability in higher education in a nutshell.

While students obviously need to take a lead role in finding suitable employment, institutions need to become much more actively involved in the overall process. Our commitment to the students we serve does not end at commencement; indeed, our responsibility extends to helping them find jobs, as well as making sure they succeed in their chosen professions.

Students who graduate thousands of dollars in debt deserve more than help writing cover letters and developing resumes. They need their alma maters to aggressively pursue job placement as a seamless part of the total college experience.

In the future, placement rates will no doubt become much more important as the primary means of gauging how well colleges and universities are fulfilling their societal obligation. If we don’t hold colleges and universities accountable for the placement rates of their graduates, what we are doing is tantamount to applying a Band-Aid to a patient who needs heart surgery.

We can do better.

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