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Is higher education leading to higher employment?

America needs a broader national vision for training students for the work force

By Kevin J. Manning

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This summer, the U.S. Department of Education introduced a proposal to regulate for-profit universities. Referred to in education circles as the "gainful employment" regulations, the proposal seeks to protect students with the highest financial need who enroll at these institutions, to ensure the likelihood that they will be able to find employment and repay their loans after completing their certificate or degree programs.

The Department of Education is proposing a new sanction, namely that if the for-profit programs are not producing "gainful employment" opportunities for these students, those institutions will lose their student aid eligibility — a major source of income for these education companies. As usual, the issue has raised partisan rancor in several congressional hearings (the latest on Sept. 30) held by Iowa Democratic Sen. Tom Harkin, chairman of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee.

As a not-for-profit, four-year and graduate residential university, my institution is not directly affected by these federal rules. But they do bring a critical issue to light for all of higher education, for-profit and not-for-profit alike: What are we doing to prepare and enable our students to secure jobs and succeed in an increasingly competitive and dynamic workforce, especially for those in the highest-need brackets? Are we doing enough? Are new models needed?

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the youth unemployment rate reached 19.1 percent in July, and the United States is experiencing some of the worst youth joblessness of the post- World War Two era. These statistics should sound an alarm across the nation. While penalizing for-profit universities for programs that produce little results and high debt for their students might be an effective short-term solution to protect students and our student loan system, we need a broader national vision from Washington, from corporate America, and from higher education about how to ensure that our young people have a future in our nation's workforce. Punitive measures from the government and "business as usual" from our nation's colleges and universities just won't cut it. Students need a new deal — a promise of access that can actually lead to job opportunity when they complete their degrees.

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With the state of our economy, the question is even more urgent for students and their families: What will a degree get me after I graduate? In the salad days of job opportunity, we university administrators could afford to wax a bit more vague about this. For many traditional academicians, this question might even seem out of place. After all, college is about imparting knowledge, the collective inheritance of humanity — not about something as mundane as a job.

Of course that is the case, but our students also want and need to work. I see this mindset in the kind of students we attract to Stevenson University. Almost one-third are first-generation college students. Their parents did not attend college, but they nurtured that dream for their children. These students expect that attending college will lead to a good job, and they consciously chose an education with programs and experiences structured to help make their dreams a reality.

Several years ago, representatives of Maryland's public and independent colleges and universities joined forces with the Governor's Workforce Investment Board on a listening tour, dialoging with business leaders around the state about the kinds of programs and initiatives that prepare students to work successfully in their companies and economic sectors. This tour was extremely productive and helped to build the kind of collaboration that higher education, business and government need.

But this process needs to be national, continual and at the top of the president's and Congress' agendas.

President Barack Obama's "Skills for America" initiative, announced Oct. 4, is a step in the right direction. By encouraging partnerships between community colleges and industry, students will be able to connect their educations to careers, many in new and emerging industries. This initiative should also move beyond community colleges to four-year institutions, public and private, that are serving many of the nation's highest-need students.

What else can higher education do? Diverse employment internships should be a near mandate across college curricula; federal and state employer advisory boards for higher education can update academia on the changing and emerging workforce skills for industry; and we should promote career development standards and requirements that challenge our students and grow their skills as much as their academic coursework expands their knowledge.

Instead of punitive measures that might ultimately limit access and discourage students and working adults from achieving a degree, we need creative measures from leaders in education and the top policymakers that ensure degrees — and the college experiences that support them — remain relevant in an increasingly dynamic and global workforce. Career education should not be sidelined; it needs to be front and center in our strategic institutional plans and national economic policy.

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