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The higher purpose of higher education is real

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Regional

The higher purpose of higher education is real

In the last few months we have witnessed a number of political debates that have become part of the national discussion on issues such as healthcare, immigration, infrastructure, freedom of speech, the media and truth itself. What is the connection between these topics and higher education? It is much more obvious than you might think.

National progress – economic, social and individual – depends on winning these debates. Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, large parts of the nation's transportation system, as well as the public higher education system, have all been heavily funded by the federal government through taxation. The rationale for this funding is that all of these programs and institutions provide services for the common good. The government has developed legislation that set the parameters under which they operate and are funded.

And this is not unique to this country. Other developed nations have established similar support services; some to an even larger extent than in the U.S. Why is that? The answer is relatively very simple, but not obvious to everyone. It has to do with the very basis of democracy as a concept: individual freedom, social responsibility, openness, equal opportunities and prosperity.

What we have done when developing democracies is to create environments in which people can adapt to change. By doing so, we as a society can foster more equality and greater opportunities. For these reasons western democracies have been examples of stAnd if you think that higher education is not really part of that mix, think again. The national system of highways that we developed after World

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War II was essential for the economic development across the nation. It was paid largely by taxpayers who, in turn, saw the economies of their states grow.

Similarly, the large investment that the federal government made since the Civil War creating the system of land-grant universities, providing funding for scholarly activities, and tuition payments or low-interest loans to college students, whether they were military veterans or not, helped propel national progress.

Now think of highways, bridges, and infrastructure in general. Because of lowering taxation, they are crumbling around the country. Some think that privatization may be the solution, but that means higher prices at the tolls, lower standards of maintenance and fewer safety regulations. After all, the bottom line of any private corporation is to generate profits.

We are seeing the same going on with higher education. Student debt is climbing to astronomical levels not only because for-profit universities encourage their students (mostly low and lower middle-class ones) to take on debt while public institutions have to raise their tuition and fees in order to operate because their states are providing them with less and less financial support.

Because of these fundamental changes in how we economically support these infrastructures, we are seeing society rattling since people are losing their

trust in the political and economic system to provide them the fairness they expect. And this has been decades in the making. Since the 1980s anti-government and anti-intellectual rhetoric has undermined trust in government as a tool for prosperity. The result? We are pointing fingers for the maladies of society unto "others," whether they are ethnic groups different from the traditional dominant ones, immigrants, or the news media.

No wonder we see populist demagogues harvesting large portions of popular support in an embrace of far right-wing ideologies that promise greatness based on hatred, simplistic but false solutions and lies. It was not long ago that fascist and Nazi regimes rose to power resulting in wars, ruin and spaces for far left-wing ideologies that predicated greatness for their peoples, but were also based in hatred, simplistic solutions and lies that did not work either. Both degenerated into less prosperity and widening inequality.

However, the fact of the matter is that large sections of the population are facing similar conditions to the ones that generated the totalitarian regimes that created so much misery while solving nothing. It does not help that liberal democracies like ours allowed the 2008 financial crisis in which so many lost so much while not seeing any accountability being required from those responsible for that crisis. Or to see Great Britain undergoing the Brexit process that is already generating chaos and turmoil in the U.K., or the rise of worldwide discontent that has been harvested by extremist parties that see only economic elites really prospering in these conditions.

So, what is the role for colleges and universities at this momentous place in time? There was a time when society looked at professors and researchers at academic centers for answers to the problems of society. Not anymore.

Now academics are vilified by the media, their expertise is ignored – if not outright ridiculed – and their wisdom is substituted by "talking points" from sources funded by special interests. But let's face it, institutions of higher education were never prepared to deal with well-organized and well-funded anti-intellectual campaigns. And to make things worse, for the most part they still have to wake up from the dream that there is wide public support for universities and from the illusion that ample financial government backing will return.

It is time for academics to take these threats as an opportunity and to herald colleges and universities as what they really are: pillars of truth and engines of human equality, opportunity and prosperity for all.

What we need is to promote higher education as a banner of progress, democracy and justice. Unless we develop this message coherently and clearly, we will succumb to the worst of human proclivities and repeat the errors that cost us so much in the past. As the philosopher George Santayana once said, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

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