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If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.

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Regional

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This is the 100th column of this series. During the two years during which this column has been published uninterrupted on a weekly basis, a common question I received is why do I defend higher education?

I remember when I decided to become a scientist. The day was October 5, 1957. I was a 6-year-old kid living in Venezuela. The big headline in the newspaper that day was that the Soviets had launched an artificial satellite named Sputnik. I was amazed. I asked my father all kinds of questions about it, but he could not tell me much more than what was in the newspaper. After all, that technological achievement had caught everyone by surprise.

I read everything I could about it. My father bought me some astronomy and space exploration books, and later “Santa” brought me a telescope.

I spent countless hours during the Christmas holidays looking at the moon’s surface, trying to identify its major features. But that was not enough: like many other kids my age, I wanted to become an astronaut and travel to other planets.

When I asked my father what I needed to do to become an astronaut, I received the first reality shock I can remember. He told me: “To begin with, you have to be either a Russian or an American.”

I felt heartbroken. My dream of traveling to planets was dashed. Luckily for me, my father took me to see a movie entitled “The Silent World” by Jacques-Yves Cousteau, the famous French explorer, in which I could see an international team surveying the oceans and its creatures as if they were exploring another planet

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filled with extraterrestrial beings. Then I made a decision. I would become a biologist. But to do so I needed an education.

I came to this country because my parents and I always wanted the best education I could get. Since I stepped into the halls of an American university, I felt extremely fortunate for the opportunities and challenges. I have accomplished many things as an American professor and hope to achieve many more for the students, faculty and staff as an administrator.

But, what can we do to maintain an education system at a level of excellence through which millions of people, including myself, have benefitted? We are talking about the same excellence that allowed this country to be what it is. To maintain national excellence in education, we need to begin by stating why education is so important, no matter how superfluous that justification may seem.

We are living in dangerous times. When one sees the reckless disregard for intellect, for knowledge, for morals, and, regrettably, for truth, we know that we are in deep trouble. We are in a situation similar to the era of Sputnik, when we suddenly discovered that we were behind in the space race, a race that had consequences for our national security. Now we see our lead being eroded. Other countries

are becoming more creative, more entrepreneurial, appealing to reason when making difficult decisions and asking tough questions to get the best guidance for their societies.

Make no mistake about it. This deterioration of human values represents a threat to our national security and to democracy as we know it. When people doubt that climate change is real and largely caused by humans, it means that people have not sharpened their critical thinking skills. That can be disastrous to our national security, and I am neither the first nor the only one saying so. The Pentagon has been saying so for many years.

Today we may not see a Sputnik because we do not really face an external enemy. We need to recognize that the enemy is among us and that it has many faces. It takes the form of acceptance of mediocrity and vulgarity, not excellence; exaltation of celebrity, not of unsung heroes; reckless disregard for the truth instead of admiration for those who seek the truth.

Therefore, the solution is neither to build walls to guard us against nonexistent enemies nor to ignore reality. The solution is to strengthen our moral resolve to do more and be more. To that end, we have to do what makes us better. We must provide accessible and quality education, an education that is comprehensive and demanding, and that aims at making us life-long learners.

We cannot continue demanding lower taxes and giving less support to education, all the while promising one that is affordable and of high quality. It simply does not add up. To those who claim that

education is expensive, I have a very simple message. Try ignorance.

The values that we need to reinforce are the ones that led the ancient Greeks to create democracy; that led Europe to transform the world with the Renaissance; that led this country to become what it was after the challenge of Sputnik. And those moments happened because societies decided to invest in education; because they respected and supported the brightest minds; because they believed that mediocrity and vulgarity were not going to make us better but much worse.

It is time for all of us, whether elected officials, captains of industry, benefactors, or educators to remember these eternal lessons from the past. And we can find these values and lessons in academia: continue the search for truth, the reverence for ethics, the permanent practice of critical thinking, the understanding of human experience all over the world, and the admiration for beauty through both art or science.

That is what makes us human and what defines us as unique – the desire to care for others and to cherish our children’s future. And if we want to win the future, we have to work hard and intelligently, so we can be proud of ourselves as human beings, so every kid anywhere in the world can have the opportunity to decide what he or she wants to be, an astronaut, a biologist, or anything else.

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