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Employers seeking skills, not robots

Dr. Aldemaro
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Letters from Academia

that there is no such a thing as a perfect solution. Third is the ability to work in teams. Because everyday problems are becoming more and more complex, we need the knowledge, experience, and insight from people with different backgrounds. To that end we have to be able to reach out and seek advice and alternative approaches, and that can only be achieved through well-designed teams.

Fourth, no matter the discipline or career path, being a good communicator is key. That means being able to express ideas convincingly to a variety of audiences, whether in writing or verbally.

By no means do I mean to imply that the only things that we need to teach in college are the skills mentioned above. People need to have a strong literacy in their discipline of choice, a combination of breadth and depth in the knowledge and practice of fundamental subjects. But without the foundational skills mentioned above, we may be producing graduates who are not prepared for the workforce because they graduate based only on their ability to memorize facts for a particular test.

The problem is that they will forget most of those items within weeks after the exam. After all, humans are not like a computer hard drive.

And this is not just a personal

opinion. A couple of weeks ago The Wall Street Journal published an article titled, "More Companies Teach Workers What Colleges Don't." The article describes a number of examples in which corporations are retraining recent college graduates for them to be able to contribute efficiently to the goals of their employers.

The crux of the article is that employers are complaining that many college graduates lack even basic critical thinking abilities. That is why many employers are becoming more and more skeptical of college diplomas and transcripts because of what they perceive to be "degree inflation." Jobs interviews are being geared more towards figuring out if the applicant has the right skills or not. Thus, many employers feel dissatisfied with the way colleges are preparing students and that they have to invest time and money in teaching important skills.

So, what are some employers doing? Their thinking is as follows: If we have to teach our entry-level employees what they need to know, we will just siphon them out from high school. This approach is, of course, bad for our higher education system, a system that is more and more dependent upon tuition money, and that in many areas of the country is experiencing a drop in enrollment numbers due to a decline in the number of high school graduates.

Another factor we need to be aware regarding the message of "preparing students for a job" motto is that there is a subtle but evident predisposition for undermining certain areas that politicians perceive as

"useless." Despite such biases, many studies (mentioned in this column over the years) have shown that people with liberal arts degrees not only are able to secure well-compensated jobs, but also show a great deal of personal satisfaction. After all, what better way to develop skills in critical thinking than majoring in philosophy? What better way to develop communication skills than majoring in English, modern languages, or communications studies? What better way to engender creativity and problem solving than majoring in the arts?

These are the kind of skills we should be emphasizing in college because they are the ones that will pave the way not only to satisfying employment, but also are the ones needed by employers. Not surprisingly, a large proportion of people (near 50 percent) with a college degree end up working in a sector that did not require the particular knowledge they learned in their majors.

Therefore, both administrators and faculty in colleges and universities need to be aware of these realities in order to promote the value of a higher education degree, particularly in the liberal arts. And there is no better way to achieve that by demonstrating that we ourselves are good communicators.

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There is a new obsession among higher education administrators and the politicians who oversee them. That new obsession can be summarized as follows: Colleges must prepare students for jobs. While this new mantra might seem innocuous and even well intentioned, there is more to it than meets the eyes.

In the first place, in the world we live today the specific requirements for different jobs continue to change at a dizzying pace. What we think is most important today will most likely not be tomorrow. Leading to these changes are factors including technological transformations, as well as changes in the economic, social, and legal foundations of society. These changes make it virtually impossible to produce graduates with the precise know-how to be applied as soon as they graduate. And no one should ever think that what one learns in college is all that is needed to succeed. It is not about memorizing facts; it is about people's ability to keep learning and adapting to a changing world.

So, what are the skills that we should be teaching in college, regardless of a particular career path? First is critical thinking, that is, the ability to gather the correct information, dismiss unsubstantiated material, and question conventional wisdom. In that way, we can make informed decisions. Second is problem solving. Life is full of surprises with new problems arising at every turn, and that is why one needs to have the ability to analyze the components of problems and discern what is the best decision possible, while being conscientious about the fact