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Vision of founding fathers becomes blurred

Aldemaro Romero Jr.

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Regional

Vision of founding fathers becomes blurred

When presidential campaigns take place, most of the times some unexpected issues become part of the political debate. And they can usually be summed up in catchy phrases such as “The U.S. as a Christian nation,” “war on women,” or “Stem Cell Research.”

Now it seems likely that some higher education issues will be hotly discussed among potential presidential candidates in the months to come. Obama’s plans for free community college tuition and ranking colleges based on affordability, degree completion and job attainment, as well as the number of guns on campuses, will probably be deliberated. Another issue that may surface is public financial support for postsecondary institutions.

In the last several weeks we have seen how some governors are already taking stands on these issues and they include both Republicans and Democrats.

For example, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker – a possible presidential contender for 2016 – has not only proposed cutting \$300 million in state funding to higher education over two years, but also suggested that the faculty should teach one more course per semester without compensation. His office also wanted to delete the public-service emphasis of his state university system, called the “Wisconsin Idea.” This proposal was later dropped after public outcry, with the governor claiming that it was a product of “confusion.”

Gov. Bobby Jindal of Louisiana, another possible presidential contender, is proposing a \$211 million cut for higher education in his state, while the newly installed Illinois governor, Bruce Rauner, just proposed major budget cuts of even bigger size for his state sys-

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

tem of postsecondary education.

Connecticut Gov. Dannel P. Maloy, a Democrat, is proposing a budget that will shortchange his state’s higher education finances by \$78 million.

And all this is happening in the midst of increasing tuition and fees, mounting student debts and, in many cases, stubborn refusal by some politicians and board of trustees to reform the financial structure of public postsecondary institutions in ways that would allow them more freedom in establishing their own revenue streams.

These cuts are a direct result of continuing tax cuts and the depreciation of the value of a higher education – now valued by many politicians as useful only as long as it produces immediate jobs for graduates.

We can trace these kinds of ideas back to Feb. 8, 1967, when California Gov. Ronald Reagan, who had been in office for only one month, announced a number of budget cuts to higher education and said “taxpayers shouldn’t be subsidizing intellectual curiosity.”

Yet, many of the Founding Fathers viewed education quite differently. Take Thomas Jefferson. Despite all of his accomplishments, including being president, he always considered the founding of the University of Virginia in 1819 as his greatest achievement. We can read in his correspondence –when referring to the university- phrases such as, “The last of my mortal cares,” “The hobby of my old age,” and “The last service I can

render my country.” These quotes show how much he cherished his brainchild for what would become the American model of public higher education.

His vision of a public university for the U.S. was clearly aimed at producing individuals with a broad, liberal education that was, as he wrote, “based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind, to explore and to expose every subject susceptible of its contemplation.” He thought that it was time for the country to endorse a public, non-sectarian higher education. He viewed a college campus as an “academic village” without matriculation, where “bright” students came when they liked it and left when they felt educated. Jefferson considered granting degrees “artificial embellishment.” For him the mission of the university was to create an environment that would help prepare students to become future leaders in many affairs and to engage in public service.

In addition to espousing these ideals, Jefferson designed the truly first American campus that included qualities that today are common features, such as a central lawn or “quad,” and a rotunda. He was an amateur architect and took inspiration from Roman construction design. And he recruited the best professors he could get from England and the U.S.

The curriculum that he designed included the study of ancient and modern languages (Latin and Greek), moral philosophy (ethics), natural philosophy (natural sciences and physics), chemistry, medicine and law. No remedial classes – so common today at public universities across this country – were even foresaw. As the late journalist Joseph Sobran pointed out, we have gone

from teaching Latin and Greek in high school to teaching remedial English in college.

The University of Virginia became the first institution of higher education in providing elective courses and a student-run honor system by which students police themselves. Jefferson’s vision of what a public university ought to be was so outstanding that it created a great deal of interest across American public life. In fact, most of the first classes of students attending it were not even Virginians. Substance, not marketing gimmicks, was the magnet for these students.

Jefferson, who is frequently quoted by conservatives (correctly or not) for writing, “That government is best which governs least,” maintained that this kind of education should be publicly supported.

Since the way some politicians have been framing postsecondary education lately is so radical, we should not be surprised to hear arguments that justify such moves based on our history, much like the debate over whether the U.S. was created as a Christian nation that took place little more than six years ago.

We need to remember the facts before we enter into a political discussion of what American public higher education should be and what the Founding Fathers thought about it. What is clear is that Thomas Jefferson and others thought that public universities had to be supported by the taxpayers. He also left very little room for mediocrity in projecting his plans.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is a writer and college professor with leadership experience in higher education. He can be contacted through his website at: <http://www.aromerojr.net>