College education should be more, not less, demanding

By HAMID SHIRVANI

It's fashionable today to say that we demand too much of education -- that we expect schools to fill the gaps left by parents too busy to watch over, guide and spend time with their children. But the truth is that -- while many parents are certainly not doing what they should to prepare their children for life and work -- when it comes to the role of higher education, we aren't demanding enough.

Our colleges and universities are failing us in two ways. They are failing to provide an educational foundation that will serve our young people not only for the moment, but for the future. And they are failing to understand what was once the central role of education -- that a liberally educated person should develop character and examine his or her values as part of the educational process.

In higher education today, there is too much emphasis on offering an education that is politically correct to the detriment of ensuring that our students have a solid foundation in what has been traditionally called the liberal arts. Intense competition and financial pressures have undercut traditional education as colleges and universities vie to meet the demands of the market. The result is curricula that bend to the fads of the day rather than staying anchored in the vital knowledge that generations of educators have defined as the liberal arts.

A report by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, "The Hollow Core: Failure of the General Education Curriculum," surveyed 50 major U.S. colleges and universities and found that "Today's college student is free to roam at large through the course lists and enroll in the most fashionable or convenient classes," according to Barry Latzer, principal author of the study. "The result is that thousands of students are graduating with only a thin and patchy education, with enormous gaps of knowledge in fields such as history, economics and literature."

A shocking 48 percent of the institutions surveyed, including Princeton, Harvard and Yale, received grades of D or F in terms of the number of courses they required among the key topics surveyed (composition, literature, foreign language, U.S. government or American history, economics, mathematics and natural or physical science).

What this means is, as the Wall Street Journal surmised, "Universities are in effect abdicating a role we once assumed defined their mission: providing direction. An education, after all, is not simply about acquiring specialized knowledge. It's about cultivating skills and the perspective that allow for informed judgment and continued learning."

Providing direction. Providing a solid foundation. In the past, these were the bedrock strengths of higher education. But no more. Today, because we fail to demand enough of higher education, students are graduating without a strong educational base on which they can continue to build in our ever-changing world.

What good is it for a student to study the "History of Comic Book Art" when he or she has no appreciation for art history? How can we expect our young people to understand a global society when they have
skipped American history and thus know little about their own cultural and political traditions?

This failure of higher education to provide direction has consequences that run even deeper than this Swiss-cheese approach to knowledge. Traditionally, the liberal arts presumed that an education asks students to examine their values and make value judgments. This emphasis on character development has been lost in the scramble to respond to the market, to develop courses that are popular but undemanding and therefore not truly about the real purpose of education.

At California State University, Stanislaus, we recognize these important distinctions and are committed to offering a true liberal arts education. We understand that, while students and their parents want an education that prepares young people for the world of work, that world is constantly changing. Only those with a broad education will be prepared to adapt to those changes. Only those who have a solid liberal arts foundation will have the intellectual perspective that enables informed judgment and continued learning.

The primary goal of higher education should be to produce a changed human being. Students who graduate from college with an understanding of the role of values and character in life will be prepared to be citizens -- to contribute to the common good rather than focusing solely on their own interests or gain.

Higher education should produce graduates who have questioned and thought deeply about who they are, where they come from and how they can make the world a better place. We should expect -- and demand -- no less.

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