THE CHANGING WORLD OF WORK & THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

What should we ask of higher education?

Our country is anxious about the future of higher education. There is a disconnect between what academic leaders feel they’re doing—preparing students for the workplace—and what is actually happening with graduates—entering into the working landscape that is one-third freelancers, independent contractors, and temporary workers (jobs that don’t allow workers to fulfill their capacities and don’t pay enough or provide benefits) with an average of $30,000 in debt.

What is going on?

The workplace is changing. New technology and automation eliminate more jobs than they create. Work is stressful and unwavering and negativity spreads to coworkers, but workers take off less and work longer to avoid backsliding. Business leaders are not getting college graduates with the skills needed for the workplace.

Today, we will explore 3 perspectives: the skills needed for the workplace—first stems from the conviction that the top leaders are not getting college grads with an average of $30,000 in debt.

1. PREPARE STUDENTS FOR THE JOB MARKET

Colleges and universities should tailor their programs to the real needs of employers and direct more of their educational resources toward vocational and pre-professional training.

Develop closer partnerships between businesses and academic institutions, so that courses are tailored to meet the evolving needs of employers, and students graduate with the skills they need to succeed in the workplace.

But, degree programs oriented primarily around workforce development typically lack the elements of a well-rounded curriculum, like critical thinking, community service, and collaborative problem solving.

Offer students direct pathways to graduation with fewer elective requirements, thereby giving them less leeway to take courses that may not apply toward their major or degree program.

However, academic quality and student engagement may suffer as students engagement may suffer as students have less freedom to explore subjects outside their chosen focus of study—particularly in the humanities.

Provide more internships and work-study programs that enable students to immerse themselves in the world of work and learn professional skills through direct experience.

However, this type of on-the-job training would have to substitute for time spent in the classroom—they’re waterlining down the curriculum—or extend the time needed to graduate.

Colleges and universities can strengthen K-12 education in their communities by working with high school teachers to help them prepare students for college, as well as by offering remedial education and tutoring for struggling students.

But, this would mean shifting some of the responsibility for basic learning outcomes from high schools to colleges and universities, driving up the costs of an undergraduate education still further. Furthermore, these costs might be passed on to students in the form of higher tuition, or to taxpayers in the form of increased state spending on higher education twoard addressing vital needs in the community, such as improving K-12 education and insulating local businesses.

2. EDUCATE FOR LEADERSHIP & CHANGE

Academic institutions should focus on preparing students to become effective citizen-leaders—the men and women who will go on to create the jobs of the future, affect change, and build a better society.

Redesign the curriculum to emphasize “soft” skills, such as critical thinking, collaborative problem solving, leadership development, professional ethics, and other values and habits of mind needed for the jobs of the future.

However, rising tuition and the prospect of heavy debt mean that many students cannot afford to invest in a broad general education that focuses on intellectual discovery and the development of “soft” skills.

Require that undergraduates develop knowledge and skills outside the classroom, through internships, community service, study abroad, action research, and other experiences that integrate theory and practice.

But, this approach would undercut the traditional model of liberal education that aims to provide students with an academic environment free of worldly pressures and distractions.

Make entrepreneurship—both economic and social—an essential component of the undergraduate experience so students continually learn by working with others on solving problems and generating opportunities.

However, a stronger emphasis on entrepreneurship development might not be an appropriate strategy for a general education since not everyone can or wants to be a leader.

Develop mentorship programs where students are brought together with faculty, alumni, or other community members for one-on-one guidance and support.

However, mentorship programs could saddle students with yet one more requirement on the already long path to earning a college degree.

Offer alternative pathways to a bachelor’s degree that embraces national service, travel abroad, coursework at multiple institutions, lifelong learning, and other facets of a broader, diverse, and integrated professional education.

But, these innovative approaches, many of which have not been widely tested, might complicate academic quality and dilute the market value of a bachelor’s degree.

3. BUILD STRONG COMMUNITIES

Colleges and universities should harness their power to create jobs, generate business opportunities, provide essential skills, and drive development in their communities and in the region.

Apply the university’s knowledge and expertise to addressing vital needs in the community, such as improving K-12 education and insulating local businesses.

However, this would divert taxpayer dollars earmarked for higher education toward addressing social and economic issues only tangentially related to academic learning and scholarly research.

Leverage colleges’ and universities’ sizable assets—their purchasing power, their long-term investments, their real estate projects, their hiring practices—to improve their local communities.

But, this could burden institutions already bucking under the strain of unwieldy bureaucracies—especially at a time when many are calling for a return to the basics of student-participating learning.

Build strategic alliances, community partnerships, and outreach programs that promote two-way collaboration between academic institutions and their surrounding towns, cities, and regions.

But, in addressing community goals, colleges and universities might have to give up some of their independence.

Provide public space on college and university campuses for community members to come together, address issues, organize activities, and discover common ground.

However, opening up campuses to people in the larger community could embolden academic institutions in controversial issues and partisan causes that could compromise their neutrality.

Make community service a core part of the curriculum and expand work-study programs so students can apply their learning to the real world while at the same time providing valuable services to their communities.

But, service-learning organizations often assign students to menial roles that do not address real needs or solve actual problems in the community. As a result, service programs can breed cynicism and disengagement.