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Guest columnist

A Higher Civic Calling for Higher Education

By Toni Murdock
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In commencement services across the country, the students of the Class of 2006 leave their institutions of higher education for the wider world. Traditionally, at this time, we speak of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for these students. I want to speak of the challenges and opportunities that exist for those very institutions they now leave.

Today, the public purpose of higher education often is perceived as predominantly one of economics and entrepreneurship. Universities are touted as key to the states' economies because their primary role is to generate new business, and their curricula increasingly reflect that business and economic orientation.

It wasn't always so. With the American Revolution arose the need for enlightened public servants for our democratic society. The Founding Fathers determined that colleges were institutions for training those leaders to their civic duties. Indeed, the president of Bowdoin College, in 1802, asserted that colleges were for the common good and not the private advantage of those who attended, and students had a "peculiar obligation" to exert their talents for the public good.

Where did those beliefs go?

The answer is complex, but we can point to several key shifts in focus. Beginning in the mid-19th century, with increasing emphasis on individual rights and opportunities, students in colleges and universities came to consider their education as far more a personal than a societal investment. Over time, liberal-arts colleges became increasingly research-oriented, dedicated to establishing an objective environment for inquiry, unbiased by any given set of values.

By the mid-20th century, the Cold War redefined American science and higher education's role in research, turning universities into research engines for a federal government engaged in the containment of communism, an arms war and a race to put the first man on the moon. Concurrently, accelerated consumerism and the pursuit of "getting ahead" fixated the nation. Social responsibility took a back seat to securing financial success as a primary goal in living one's life.

Yet, now, perhaps more than ever, there is a set of civic and social values students must learn. We in higher education must not opt out of our role in bringing our

students to the crucial understanding that because they live on this Earth, they have a responsibility for its well-being. What can we do to reposition that understanding at the heart of higher education?

More than 950 presidents of colleges and universities in 31 states have joined in Campus Compact, a national coalition committed to challenging higher education to make civic and community engagement an institutional priority. We can take up the compact's challenge by providing students with opportunities to become civically engaged through studies that integrate service-learning with community-based, problem-solving approaches.

This means far more than volunteering to serve in a soup kitchen and presenting a classroom report on that experience. We must devise a community-based curriculum that not only engages students in discovering why this affluent country has so many homeless citizens and soup kitchens, but also provides opportunities for them to work with the community to solve the root causes of poverty.

Connecting studies with problem-solving service in the community deepens, complicates and challenges students' learning. It turns them into knowledge producers, not just knowledge consumers. They become citizen scholars who renew our democratic society and actively engage in shaping this nation's future.

And although it is certainly commonplace to say so, we must embrace the knowledge that our future will not be played out only within our geographical boundaries but rather in the global community. To ensure we understand that community — and, equally, that its members understand us — we must promote diversity, tolerance and a broad and deep grasp of history and cultures. We gain those things through a particular kind of education.

That kind of education sees its mission in the same way our colleges and universities of an earlier era saw theirs: as the greater good, not mere individual gain. That kind of education offers the means and adheres to the values by which students become the people who can, a day at a time, change lives for the better.

Idealistic? Yes. But these people — these teachers, preachers, journalists, museum curators, doctors, artists, public servants, musicians, humanitarian workers, diplomats — understand that cooperation, rather than competition, is what will save this world. And they understand, above all, they are citizens: local, national and global.

Graduation season is an opportune time for those of us in higher education to reflect upon and renew our commitment to inspire graduates to be better citizens.

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