

LISTEN UP, GAME ON

A Perspective On Degree Completion and Higher Education

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The cost of not having a degree is growing according to 2014 Pew Research. (Pew Research, Social and Demographic Trends, Feb.11, 2014). On the surface one can be understandably perplexed. Degree holders are having difficulty finding real jobs. Unemployment of graduates is not uncommon. People are dropping out of the labor pool. Tuition debt is high while tuition and fees are rising. Underemployment of college graduates is happening all too frequently. Wages have stagnated. The wages students forgo while attending colleges – the “opportunity cost”—are lower than they used to be, and the average wages for those who don’t have a college degree keeps falling. Even though the wages for college graduates are not increasing, the gap between their pay and the earnings of those with only high school diploma has increased, keeping the value of a college degree from falling (Lance Lambert, September 5, 2014, The Chronicle of Higher Education). Obviously the wish for maximizing the economic benefits of a college degree is not what it could be. However, without a college degree the rewards are worse.

“Employed Millennial College graduates are more likely than their peers with a high school diploma or less education to say their job is a career or a stepping stone to a career (86% vs. 57%). In contrast, Millennials with a high school diploma or less are about three times as likely as college graduates to say their work is “just a job to get (them) by”—42% vs. 14%. Further findings among employed millennials as college graduates indicate that they are “significantly more likely than those without any college experience to say that their education has been -very useful- in preparing them for work and careers”—46% vs. 31%. And “these better educated young adults are more likely to say they have the necessary education and training to advance in their careers”—63% vs. 41%. (Pew Research, Social and Demographic Trends, February 11, 2014).

DOES COLLEGE MAJOR AND DEGREE MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Regardless of major, a degree is more than the sum of its parts. It embodies experiences such as problem solving, civil discourse regarding opposing points of view, skills of lifelong learning, responsibility, scientific method, research, due diligence, inspiration and motivation, creativity, written and oral communications, evidence-based reasoning, adaptive learning, problem solving, math, situation analysis, etc. all within the context of majors and minors. These experiences are essential to effective application at the workplace and to society in general.

A college degree from an accredited institution carries weight with employers. It provides a solid grounding for job success and career pathway maturity.

Regarding the issue of quality degrees, more education institutions are redefining courses as well as describing goals and learner outcomes of degree programs. The LEAP (Liberal Education and America's Promise) initiative provided by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, for example, defines learning outcomes of liberal education. The Lumina Foundation's competency-based Degree Qualification Profile, supported by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, is being tested by over 400 colleges in 45 states. Many colleges/universities are doing things differently that fuel the mission of a quality sustainable workforce in addition to personal and intellectual development. Typically, competency-based approaches also take into account skills and competency requirements that are desired by business/industry. The Chattanooga Region Talent Dividend Initiative utilizes "Roundtables" to bring higher education and business/industry together to dialogue for purposes of establishing competency-based programs that include bridging the gap between business requirements and the preparation of graduates. Getting out of college holding a high quality degree (Associates, Bachelors, etc.) or professional certificate is just as important as getting into college. A professional certificate is considered a stepping-stone toward a quality degree. Lumina's goal is for 60% of U.S. citizens to achieve a degree by 2025. Researchers claim that

approximately 63% of jobs by 2018 will require at least a certificate or post-secondary degree (Carnevale, A., Smith, N. and Strohl, J., 2010; Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, June, 2010). The Chattanooga Region Talent Dividend Initiative (CRTDI) objective is to ultimately increase degree holders by at least 60% of the region's population. The CRTDI additional degree attainment rate is set every three years. Celebration events subsequent to each 3-year cycle are planned to commemorate achievement of degree completion. This keeps the momentum to achieve local, state, and national goals. Established objectives become interim benchmarks allowing for the maintenance of a tightly focused mission. The ultimate goal for the nation set by the Lumina Foundation is for 60% of the nation's citizens to achieve a postsecondary credential by 2025. This keeps employers, education institutions, and community leaders working from the "same page," being knowledgeable of the fruits that strengthen economic development and competitiveness from the bottom up. The National Talent Dividend and local actions are not a passing fad or one-time episode; rather, they are ongoing and integral to the fabric of local, state, and national economic strength.

DELIVERY MAKES A DIFFERENCE

The old practice of "stand and deliver," coupled with "take it or leave it," contributes little to nothing to learner success and the achievement of these objectives. A revised delivery format bolsters traditional and non-traditional learner success, particularly resulting in developing a huge reservoir of fully developed untapped talent among previously non-completion learners. Provost Chaouki Abdallah, University of New Mexico, expresses the importance of will power of UNM in his statement, "Our first priority is student success. We have invested in programs that are paying off not only in better retention and graduation rates, but also in better quality of programing and student support services. While not yet satisfied with our retention and graduation rates, we must

maintain the positive momentum of the last four years” (Blair, Cinnamon, October 23, 2014, University of New Mexico Newsroom). Nothing can take the place of the power and influence of a faculty within which the learner believes that the faculty care about whether they succeed in course work as well as their well being.

According to the Pew Research of Millennials survey findings relative to usefulness of major by field of study, 60% of science and engineering majors indicates that their major is “very closely” related to their current job. Forty-three (43%) of social science, liberal arts, education and business majors indicate a “very close” relationship. On the other hand, 39% of sciences and engineering majors indicate either “somewhat closely” to “not very closely” or “not at all” relative to the usefulness of a major. Examination of these same categories (“somewhat closely” to “not very closely” or “not at all”) relative to the relationship to their jobs shows that 57% of majors for social science, liberal arts, and education responded the same way. Business majors concerning the same categories of response options show that 56% of majors as less than closely related (Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends, The Rising Cost of Not Going to College, February, 11, 2014). Not infrequently, completers find themselves in jobs not directly related to their major field. These data show the reality of holding a degree major in fields of study relative to a job. Out-of-field majors that say their major is less than closely related to a job is not bad as the value of work experience is gained

Anecdotal evidence indicates a diversity, when the degree major is not directly related to jobs held. For example, a successful General Construction Contractor holds a degree major in Philosophy and Religion, a history major serves as a successful accountant, or a Civil Engineer is a successful cabinet-maker. Life circumstances such as “calling to serve,” interest, motivation, family and finance, etc., have a clear relationship to jobs held, regardless of degree major. Often some

successful entrepreneurs do not even have a degree major, which is the exception and not customary. Stockell reports in *USA Today* that the level and diversity of college majors is the “same as it ever was,” noting that the top 10 most popular college majors include: 1) business administration and management, 2) general psychology, 3) nursing, 4) general biology, 5) teacher education and professional development, specific levels and methods, 6) criminal justice and corrections, 7) accounting, 8) liberal arts and sciences, general studies and humanities, 9) English language and literature and 10) history. Most of all these majors are broad in scope and give holders a variety of options regarding jobs and career tracks. (Stockell, Carly, *USA Today*, Same As It Ever Was: Top 10 Most Popular College Majors, October 26, 2014). The Pew Research survey involving millennial findings further indicates that 50% of respondents say that “getting more work experience while still in school would be among the “should-have-done-list if they had the choice to do it over again”. (Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends, The Rising Cost of Not Going To College, February 11, 2014). Also capturing the importance of “work experience,” a number of colleges and universities are embedding opportunities for learners to apply skills and concepts as part of course requirements. This is typically referred to as “service learning.” Also, participating in an internship while in college helps with the potential for full-time employment and likely being more engaged at work. (Gallop-Purdue Index Inaugural National Report-joint research effort of Gallop, Purdue University and the Lumina Foundation-Great Jobs, Great Lives, Sept. 22,2014). Furthermore, the Great Jobs, Great Lives report addresses a holistic view of institutional outcomes including “great jobs” and “great lives” of graduates that go beyond the traditional metrics of job placement and salaries.

COLLEGE COURSE WORK AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EXTERNAL TO THE CLASSROOM

Research clearly reveals that ongoing learning is the “life blood” of personal and intellectual development, firm productivity, and society in general. Learning is a tripartite function that includes: a) education (off-the-job supplied by education institutions, b) training (firm specific knowledge and skills, and c) experience (accumulation of workplace knowledge/skills and other life learning experiences).

Learning experience can substitute for classroom-based course learning. It makes little sense for someone to take a classroom-based course relative to what they already know. More colleges and universities are recognizing experiential learning and providing credit towards a degree. This is possible after thoroughly documenting experiential learning that is evaluated against course/graduation standards by in-field specialists. Organizations that provide evaluation services are the America Council of Education (ACE) and the National College Credit Recommendation Services (NCCRS). Also the NCCRS and ACE conduct evaluations of education programs of business and industry, translating them into college equivalences. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning reported that adults who did not earn prior learning credit take 2.5 times longer to complete their degree than do adults who earn credit outside the college or university classroom. “Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) learners also had higher persistence rates and faster times to degree completion” (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) March 2010), *Fueling the Race To Post-Secondary Success*. This significantly reduces the time to degree achievement and reduces the cost per credit hour to achieve a quality degree. Thus significant return-on investment (ROI) is gained. Ways to determine acceptable college level credit include: 1) corporate training, 2) continuing education (CEUs), 3) personal and professional experiences and professional licenses and exams, 4) military experience, and, 5) Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Such as those provide by Coursera, Udacity, Edx and/or badges, etc. Traditional policies and practices of higher education that address learner success are being transformed. Formally, processes applicable to athlete’s academic success

are now receiving more attention for the broader student body, including learners with some college/no degree. Issues of recruitment, advisement, retention, and success, are being addressed by contracted companies applying software programs (digital technology). Some of these approaches include, for example, CollegeSource, Campus Labs, Starfish, Gradenfirst, Success Navigator, Salesforce, Ellucian that were recently addressed in a dedicated issue of *The Chronical of Higher Education*, NEXT, The Quest for Student Success, Sept.19, 2014.

Such sweeping initiatives have triggered refreshing practices of traditional approaches, invoking more meaningful face-to face personalized attention. The popularity of “success coaches” and Student Success Centers have come to the forefront. It is crucial that one-to-one personal attention does not fall out of the picture. Too frequently, excess energy is consumed by preoccupation with accreditation and institutional ranking. Accreditation and ranking have their place, but personalized and hassle-free attention should be devoted to learner success. Higher education institutions are becoming more serious in this regard. In other words, the “new coaches” are on campus. It is noted, however, that “new coaches” only facilitate the traditional role of all faculty relative to responsibilities for learner’s navigating admissions and records, motivation, inspiration, and success.

Tuition reimbursement practices offered by business/industry are of great value. A Tuition Assistance Value Study (2011) undertaken by Capella University, EdLink, and the ROI Institute in collaboration with the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning found that perspectives of employers elicited selected themes including: 1) more motivated employees, 2) strengthened career paths, 3) job security, 4) increased morale, 5) confidence, 6) self-esteem, 7) teamwork ...(see more information: www.capella.edu; www.edlinktuition.com; www.roiinstitute.net). Employee tuition assistance programs have a positive financial and motivational impact on the employee and the

organization.

JOBS FOLLOW PEOPLE EFFECT

The Chattanooga Region Talent Dividend Initiative is becoming more effective in a region that is moving into the upper ranks of the knowledge-intensive economy. Talent is the new fuel of the 21st Century. A synergy develops that is attractive to businesses with jobs in those geographic areas where degree completers congregate, thus creating a quality sustainable workforce. According to Richard Florida, professor of Public Policy at George Mason University, “Those (universities) that focus on all three T’s (technology, talent, and tolerance) will realize considerable advantage in generating innovation, attract and retaining talent, and creating sustainable prosperity” (Florida, Richard; Regions and Universities Together Can Factor A Creative Economy, Chronicle of Higher Education, September 15, 2006).

A degree gives the individual more room to grow and capitalize on business, job expansion, transformation, turnover, and retirements. An individual who dreams of completing a degree can take advantage of changes occurring in colleges and universities (i.e. experiential learning credit for higher education level learning, alternative degree delivery, etc.). Completing a degree is not the end of the game. Rather, regions should also focus simultaneously on retention and attraction of talent. If not, one region’s development of talent becomes another region’s supply of talent. Also, individuals who aspire to achieve a degree should approach the challenge much like fueling an automobile, “fill it,” “drive it,” and continue to “refuel” for short trips and long journeys. Side trips might be considered only to build and grow work experience, even if underemployed. Building one’s work experience portfolio prepares one for the jobs and career(s) desired. Vocational certificates may lead to a fulltime job, but also consider the certificate as a stepping stone to a degree. Not infrequently,

however, some individuals are diverted from a career pathway by depending on a certain wage, otherwise called the “reservation wage.” This job wage is at a level below which the individual will not accept. This could lead to nothing more than government dependence and no work experiences. Not working is tempting and is an easy choice. Potential growth to build one’s work experience stagnates when “false pride” overrides reality. Demand for skilled people is growing faster than supply. Jobs are changing as well. The Aaron Smith and Janna Anderson’s, Pew Research Internet Project report that “the vast majority of respondents to the 2014 Future of the Internet canvassing anticipate that robotics and artificial intelligence will permeate wide segments of daily life by 2025.” Further, respondents (widely recognized technology builders and analysts) canvassed, indicate a theme of adapting to technology changes by “inventing entirely new types of work; by taking advantage of uniquely human capabilities.” (Smith, Aaron and Anderson, Janna, AI, Robotics and the Future of Jobs, August 6, 2014, Pew Research Internet Project, pp.1-2).

Moretti (2012) addresses the notion that “jobs follow people” in that a critical mass of expertise changes the demographics of an area, thus creating a “Great Divergence.” These divergences of talent concentrations are like magnets attracting more talent and potential employers. (Moretti, Enrico, *The New Geography of Jobs*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Copyright 2012, New York, New York 1003, pp.3-4).

CONCLUSION

The landscape is changing relative to the importance of a college degree. More jobs require

at least a postsecondary degree. Employers are demanding that colleges and universities close the gap of essential skill sets, such as creative thinking, problem solving, oral and written communications, analytics, etc., in courses and degree programs. Employers are seeking persons with work experience, no matter what the job classification might be. Colleges and universities are responding to employer needs, resulting in course and degree program adaptations, on line delivery, acceptance of documented learning external to higher education classroom seat—time for college level credit. Additional providers other than the traditional higher education institutions are providing courses that meet the flexibility of convenience of persons particularly those with some college/no degree. These alternative course-delivery systems that may be used for credit include Coursera, Udacity, edX, Straighterline, Mozilla, and Academic Partnerships, as well as Cengage and Ed2go. (Council for Higher Education Accreditation Quality Assurance and Alternative Higher Education: Policy Perspective, The Commission on Quality Assurance and Alternative Higher Education, August 2014).

Reverse transfer policies that assure the articulation of credits resulting in awarding associates degrees while learners are working toward baccalaureate degrees are available. Also, more than 57 metro areas, largely driven by higher education institutions, along with businesses and continuous nonprofits are meeting the challenges of reaching world-wide dominance of an educated citizenry. This of course is at the heart of a quality sustainable workforce to continuously build and grow local, state, and national economies.

I am reminded of Phil Shapiro's bedtime story, *When the Clock Got Sick*, which illustrates this changing landscape. The clock sat prominently above the main door of a respected bank. It represented the center of town. Time on the clock started slipping backwards a few minutes that did not cause much alarm. Then the clock got worse, sometimes jumping forward an hour or two and

then backward. It became clear to the townspeople that the clock was sick. Healing a sick clock is not an easy thing to do. The bank was eager to get the clock working again. The banker promised to do everything possible to fix the clock. During the interim, while waiting on the part to fix it, the clock was switched off. For a long period of time the lights on the clock were dark. One day a UPS truck delivered the part that made the clock healthy again. There was a huge sigh of relief when the clock started again. Townspeople reset their watches and went on their merry way. Much like the sick clock, higher education has been slipping by not keeping up with the changing landscape and little attention given learners with some college/no degree. Initially, few people paid any attention, until the realization that large numbers of learners had not and are not completing college, leaving a large void in untapped talent. The leader of the free world is lagging behind in college graduates. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports that in the United States” attainment rate(college graduates) is increasing much faster in many other countries”. (OECP, Education At A Glance 2014, Country Note, OECP Publishing, pp.1-2). U.S. business and industry were (are) losing position in the global economy and competitiveness. Talent of citizens was being wasted and lost while businesses were clamoring for a quality sustainable workforce. It has now become clearer to more people that higher education was sick, like the town people realized that the clock was sick. Healing a sick clock is not an easy thing, nor is healing higher education an easy thing. Circumstances as they are, people (community leaders, business/industry and some higher education administrators and faculty) have become eager to get higher education less insulated and an educated citizenry fixed just like the banker and townspeople who became eager to fix the clock. However, during the interim, while waiting on a fix, some higher education institutions rebuffed the call to become engaged, and things went “dark” much like the clock going dark. Many higher education institutions today are finding a fix. Constituents are relieved and see pathways to follow as the fix is in. When the fix was in, the town sighed a huge relief when the clock was turned back on,

just like people connected to higher education, business/industry and those who dream of completing their degree sigh a great relief.

Those with some college/no degree now have hope to fulfill their dreams and can if they have the will, effort, and desire. Likewise, a growing number of higher education institutions nowadays have the will, effort, and desire to change and adapt to 21st century challenges. The clock is working. Higher education is moving in the right direction. According to Jennifer Ludden, writing for NPR in an article entitled “Going to College May Cost You, But So Will Skipping It” (February 11, 2014), addresses the importance of a college education. Citing the Pew Research Center Study, “The Rising Cost of Not Going to College,” Ms. Ludden quotes Paul Taylor, executive vice-president of Special Projects at Pew “it’s pretty much case closed when it comes to the benefits of going to college. In a modern, knowledge-based economy, the only thing more expensive than going to college is not going to college”. In a survey of college presidents Taylor goes on by stating that “the public has a keen awareness of the substantial earning dividend that college graduates enjoy in their working lives.” (Pew Research Center, Social and Demographic Trends, May 16, 2011, Is College Worth It ?, Paul Taylor, Director, Washington D.C. 20036, p. 12).

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