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## A New Era of Educated Floridians

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As in our nation's capital, there has been much talk about the value of higher education degrees here in Florida. In order to attract and grow business, there must be a well-trained work force and an ever-emerging intelligent populace.

Many national foundations have jumped into the discussion and have similar refrains. There is an overwhelming concern that if we do not produce more educated citizens, we will fall behind the rest of the world in the global market.

As the head of an association of private colleges and universities, I wholeheartedly agree with the need for a scholastically prepared work force. I have witnessed firsthand the many benefits of higher education as individuals work to advance themselves economically and culturally. By advancing their education, they advance their lives, and in turn, advance our economic environment.

The future demands a new era of educated Floridians. There is a widening gap between those who advance in school and those who fail to finish. Study after study has shown a high school diploma adds to an individual's economic vitality. With every added degree this vitality increases. No matter how loud we claim to pursue the mantra of "no child left behind," each student who fails to fully complete their education is going to be just that.

This expanding knowledge gap was the focus of a recent study by the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University. They predicted 63 percent of all Florida jobs will require some college education by 2018. Unfortunately, Florida is significantly behind this benchmark. Today, only 24 percent of working-age Floridians have two-year or four-year degrees. This is behind the national average by approximately 16 percent and the Obama administration wants to increase this number to 60 percent by 2020.

Of course, the pursuit of advanced education encompasses more than just the pursuit of a baccalaureate. Highly skilled workers must be produced in many fields and in many endeavors. However, in all cases there remains an overriding factor: the need to produce a literate, creative and engaged work force with the ability to learn and relearn through a lifetime of learning.

While it is important we ramp up our STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) degree production in order to compete, there must also be an aggressive and comprehensive component that engages reasoning, problem-solving, ethics, values, literature and the arts. These components of a traditional liberal arts education are essential elements for the advancement of society and, in turn, the expansion of our economy.

Higher education is increasingly global with more than 200 international branch campuses and plans for future expansion. Increased numbers of students from all countries study abroad. These expanded options include programs from a broad section of majors, with an increased focus in liberal arts. Yale is now in Singapore with that nation's first liberal arts college, Vanderbilt has proposed a teachers college in Abu Dhabi and NYU has a planned liberal arts college in China, which now has 17 university branch campuses across the nation.

The world is hungry for knowledge. The degrees and options are as varied as one might imagine. Florida must compete within these worldwide activities by producing more graduates with quality educations in diverse areas.

Students entering post-secondary education are hard-pressed to know exactly where they might work in the future, especially since so many of the jobs of today did not exist a decade ago. It is more important than ever for students to develop useful skills along with their ability to comprehend more specific talents. Tomorrow is largely unknown, but wide-ranging reasoning skills remain applicable to every situation.

We are headed into a world where a lifetime of learning is the norm and not the exception. The curricula of our higher education institutions must encompass a wide range of instructive options in order to build a better future for our state. Whatever the program, STEM, liberal arts, technical certificates, etc., all of it must be imbued with reading, writing, calculus, reasoning and ethics. Without this, we will come up short in the end.

Forecasting the exact nature of the future is impossible, but skilled thinkers can anticipate what might be. The most useful skill of all, in any endeavor, is a creative imagination -- the ability to see as much of what might be as what is.

Hockey great Wayne Gretzky once said, "I skate to where the puck is going to be, not to where it has been." He transcended the huge gap between just being good at something and being great because he could envision what had not yet happened. We need to build a skilled work force in Florida capable of thinking the same.

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