



WHAT SHOULD YOU GET FROM A COLLEGE EDUCATION

Steven Budd – March 8, 2010

Much of the current conversation about high schools and colleges is how to get kids to graduate and then how to get them into some kind of college. Less has been said about what actually happens to them when they get there. We all expect that college should improve one's prospects for future employment. Less specific and a bit harder to define are the characteristics of a well educated person, like leadership ability and engaged citizenship. For high school and college faculty the common language to this conversation is "learning outcomes", or what a graduate of high school and college ought to know and be able to do to be successful in work and life.

In a report I read this week titled "The Quality Imperative", it was said that only "one in four employers believes that colleges, community colleges, and universities are doing a good job of preparing college graduates for the demands of the global economy". This rather stark assessment comes from a national survey of employers conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), an organization dedicated to the advancement of the liberal arts. According to the employers, colleges should be putting more emphasis on describing learning outcomes, not only for what graduates should know, but for what students should get out of each and every class they take. Students should also know how to apply that knowledge in some real-world context. The AAC&U not only agrees with the employer's position, but goes on to show how the liberal arts are important to achieving the qualities employers are looking for. Some highlights from the survey are the percentage of employers who want colleges to place more emphasis on topics like: global issues 67%, written and oral communication 89%, critical thinking and analytic reasoning 81%, complex problem solving 75% and ethical decision making 75%. Learning outcomes relating to qualities like these are typical of liberal arts and general education courses. This is why the liberal arts have long served to anchor the curriculum. The liberal arts core is what defines the difference between education and more narrowly focused job skills training. I think the most important point to take away from this survey is that educators and employers seem to agree that a well rounded education includes both competence in a career field and competence in skills for an engaged and thoughtful life. In the words of AAC&U president Carol Geary Schneider, "it is very clear from our survey of employers that higher education needs to increase not only the numbers of students who graduate, but the levels of learning they obtain in college". The buzzwords of "access" – making higher education more available, and "completion rates" – making sure that more students finish, are simply not enough.

An important parallel issue which is quickly rising to the fore is who gets to take advantage of a community college versus a four-year college or university education. The Quality Imperative speaks to this by emphasizing that the multiple goals for education – preparation for work, citizenship, leadership and life – should apply to all students who are educated in American higher education, especially students who begin or return to their studies in career and technical programs. In some states we're seeing the segmenting of high school students into community college and four-year college tracks. The presumption, to which I have long railed against, is that community colleges are the locus of technical education and that we minimize

the liberal arts and academics. The not so hidden assumption is that the liberal arts are important to future leaders who will come out of the universities but much less important for the rank and file who will come out of the community college. The fact is, the world has changed dramatically and the artificial distinction between technical education, education for citizenship and the liberal arts is now obsolete. The results of the AAC&U survey serve to confirm this view.

On a final note, I am happy to report that facility improvements and individual program accreditations are proceeding well at RVCC. Even in times of tight budgets, the updating of facilities and laboratories ensures that our students are taught using the most current equipment and technology. State of the art facilities and equipment are important because they enable us to teach students on the same equipment that they will find when they enter the workplace. Mirroring the workplace is the best way to ensure that graduates hit the ground running. State of the art facilities also minimize the need for employers to provide additional training before graduates are job ready. The quality and currency of facilities and equipment also supports successful transfer to four-year colleges and universities as well as the success of students who come to us from well equipped high schools.