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A View from Melrose

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The value of education

For the last few weeks, the newspapers, Internet and broadcast media have been full of stories about higher education. No doubt inspired by spring graduations, these pieces address student debt, college costs, and the relationship between education and employment. Some of them are factual and thoughtful; more of them are not.

There is no question that all of us at Linfield – faculty, staff, students, trustees and even alumni – worry about these economic matters. Student debt is not new; certainly my wife and I both incurred significant debt when we were in college. But serious economists differentiate between college debt and credit card debt or auto loans or even mortgages. That is, if handled responsibly, college debt is an investment that grows in value rather than depreciating after the purchase is made. During this last economic recession, college graduates were half as likely to be unemployed as non-graduates, and they annually earned an average of \$20,000 more than non-graduates.

It's also true that college prices have gone up dramatically. But so has financial aid, especially at Linfield. In fact, *The Oregonian* recently published an article about an incoming Linfield freshman who said that it will cost her \$4,000 less to attend Linfield than the University of Oregon.

Then there's the job question. This week a reporter predicted that the first jobs of 60 percent of this year's college graduates will not be directly related to their college majors.

I don't know what the statistic would have been 10 years ago. But somehow I don't think it was so dramatically different. It's here, perhaps, where we see the greatest disconnect between our public discourse and the real goal of education. At Linfield our primary goal is to educate, not to train. That is, we provide our students with a variety of courses and experiences that make them flexible, life-long learners. According to a recent study, focused training in business becomes obsolete five years after it's achieved; the key to success is learning how to learn throughout your life and career. National surveys of employers have reported the following: "They want to hire 22-year-olds who can write coherently, think creatively and analyze quantitative data. They're perfectly happy to hire English or biology majors."

But for me, at least, there's an even more important issue that is overlooked in the many stories about the economic value or cost of college education. We are not simply educating students to prepare them to be successful financially. We are also educating learners to make them informed citizens of our nation

and our world; we are preparing them to make a difference in other people's lives; and we are helping them find their way to fulfillment and joy in life. Some things can't be measured solely in monetary terms; I believe that's true of a Linfield education. And that lesson is confirmed again and again as our students and alumni excel in their careers, and in life. 🌸

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President

