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A View from Melrose

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Personalized education is core value



I recently attended a workshop entitled “Securing America’s Future,” with two Linfield professors and two administrators. Sponsored by the Council of Independent Colleges, the workshop offered examples and ideas about innovation in American higher education.

After hearing from several experts and conversing in small groups with representatives from other colleges, our Linfield contingent had its own meeting to discuss the future. Our task was to address predetermined questions about challenges, changes and mission.

We were to “identify two aspects of your institution’s mission that are nonnegotiable.” I was gratified by the unanimous, clear, consistent response from the Linfield group: personalized education, with liberal arts at its core. I was doubly impressed that our professors came from business and nursing, not from traditional liberal arts disciplines.

There are many misperceptions about the practical value of the liberal arts. There are even more misunderstandings about independent colleges. So let me present some facts to clarify the importance of our sector:

- We enroll a higher proportion of students from households with incomes of less than \$40,000 than do public institutions.
- Thanks to fundraising and donations, students at private colleges pay far less than the actual cost.
- More than a third of private-college graduates have student debt of less than \$10,000. Private-college borrowers have the lowest student loan default rates of all sectors in higher education. Our students graduate at higher rates than at other institutions, they graduate in much less time than at public institutions and we are more successful with our large numbers of first-generation students and students of color.
- And our graduates earn higher average starting annual salaries than their public-institution peers.

It is true that students majoring in the humanities and social sciences often begin with lower salaries than engineering students – but the earnings gap closes for liberal arts majors over time, so that in the peak earnings years, they match or exceed those from other fields. Why is this so? Because liberal arts majors develop critical-thinking skills, they become accustomed to working with others, they communicate more effectively and they learn how to learn. Ultimately, they become the managers and leaders.

Steve Jobs said he didn’t want more engineers at Apple. He wanted more liberal arts majors, because the only thing we know for sure about the future is that it will be different from the present. In fact, many of today’s jobs didn’t exist 20 years ago – flexibility and lifetime learning are more important than ever.

Linfield has strong programs in the liberal arts and sciences. We also have strong programs in pre-professional fields like business, nursing and teacher education. Time and again I’m told that our nursing graduates stand out from others, not just because their technical knowledge is excellent, but because they communicate so well, make smart decisions and work well with others. What’s the secret to their success? The liberal arts courses that form the base of their education.

America needs colleges like Linfield more than ever; for us, a personalized liberal arts education will always be nonnegotiable. 🌿

–Thomas L. Hellie, President