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Anne D. Neal: Colleges aren't preparing students for jobs

By: Anne D. Neal
Examiner Staff Writer
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With the unemployment rate in double digits, the nation's attention is squarely focused on jobs. Recently, the White House hosted a jobs forum at which President Obama called on the country to "get to work" to make this another "American century."

The president specifically called on our universities to see what they "can do to better support and prepare our workers -- not just for the jobs of today, but for the jobs five years from now and 10 years from now and 50 years from now."

The truth is, no one knows exactly what the jobs of the future will look like. But we do know a few things.

One is that people are changing jobs more and more often -- 10.8 times between the ages of 18 and 42, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This suggests the need for a firm grounding in the foundational skills and knowledge that cut across jobs.

The same can be said for the jobs of the future. We know that whatever they may be, these jobs, like those of today, will demand certain basic aptitudes. These include writing a coherent paragraph, making sense of a written document and performing basic mathematical operations.

We also know, and have known for quite some time now, that universities are not doing their part in this regard. A staggering number of college graduates lack these basic skills: According to the latest National Assessment of Adult Literacy, merely 31 percent of college graduates can read and understand a complex book. Sixty-nine percent can't compute and compare the per-ounce cost of different food items.

If our college graduates can't find their way around a supermarket, how are they to compete in the globalized economy?

And if this is to be another American century, we don't just need excellent workers. We also need an educated body of citizens.

Here, too, our universities are failing us. According to one recent survey, more than a third of our college graduates cannot name the three branches of government, and barely half can identify the underlying principle of free-market economies.

The truth is, we shouldn't be surprised that our college graduates know so little. At our leading universities, students can graduate without having taken a single class in such crucial subjects as mathematics, American government or economics. As a recent report by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni showed, less than 5 percent of our top colleges require economics, only 11 percent require U.S. government or history, and nearly half allow students to graduate without having taken college-level mathematics.

Classes in these key subjects are of course still taught, but so are classes in countless other subjects. Economics 101 and English composition should not simply be one more option among "Global Martial Arts, Film and Literature" (Cornell), "History of Food and Cuisine" (Yale) and "Punk Cinema and Media" (UCLA).


America may still have "the best universities in the world," as President Obama asserted in the conclusion of his speech, but being the best doesn't mean there is no room for improvement.

It's time for our universities to give America the 21st-century work force and citizens we need. And there is no simpler way to start than by making sure students learn what they need to know.

Anne D. Neal is president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.

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