

## Viewpoints: Time to rethink roles of college

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It's easy to name what we believe is wrong with American higher education today – a bachelor's degree costs too much, takes too long to complete, encourages students to take on too much debt and doesn't guarantee a job on completion.

Concerns about cost, time to completion, debt and usefulness are pretty powerful objections to a college education.

However, most of our society recognizes the virtually unassailable truth that a college education is the premier portal to career success and personal prosperity. Michael Greenstone and Adam Looney of the Brookings Institution estimate that "the return on a bachelor's degree is equivalent to an investment that returns 15.2 percent per year – more than double the average return to stock market investments since 1950, and more than five times the returns to corporate bonds, gold, long-term government bonds, or homeownership. Over a lifetime, the average college graduate earns roughly \$570,000 more than the average person with a high school diploma only."

The return on this investment is clear. But the choice of how and where to invest in a college education is less clear.

Maybe it's time for us to look at a college degree differently. Maybe it's time to realize that as with all products and services, there is not a single version in the American marketplace that makes sense for all people.

What do we want from a college degree?

Without a doubt, Americans want college degrees linked to good jobs because good jobs lead to prosperity and self-sufficiency. According to a 2010 survey by Hart Research Associates, successful performance in good jobs requires the very things students should learn in bachelor's degree programs: good thinking skills, the ability to write and speak clearly, to read critically and with comprehension, and to synthesize and analyze data from a variety of inputs.

In addition, we may want other benefits of a college degree, such as the development of networks of business colleagues and collaborators, the opportunity to learn to navigate global markets and communities, or the time-honored tasks and experiences associated with building individual character and moral integrity.

But maybe there are other things that we have grown used to thinking should also be part of a college education but which really aren't part of a degree. These things are really more of a developmental process – essentially coming-of-age rituals, such things as joining social clubs, or living away from our parents in high-end college residences.

The demand for these features has led many colleges and universities to look like "Club Med with light reading" as the cost of these amenities raises the price of education even higher.

Perhaps it's time to rethink the different models of a bachelor's degree and consider the best value of education for each individual circumstance.

Certainly a married 25-year-old parent of two children has had plenty of "coming of age" experiences already, but could use a lifetime of earning benefits likely to come with a bachelor's degree. And perhaps this is where we need more choice, not less, including:

- The publicly funded university designed for the traditional residential young student.
- The not-for-profit university that provides flexible scheduling and networked career connections.
- The faith-based university that connects its students to learning in an ethical and spiritual context.

In each of these settings there are multiple cost variables that will be considered as each student – and their parents, where appropriate – consider the purpose of college and what it means for them.

There have been many suggestions for controlling costs in higher education.

Introducing the use of online technology can improve access to an "anywhere, anytime" experience for students and theoretically help them cover more coursework in a limited time frame. The judicious use of technology with the right faculty guide can provide students with access to dialog and conversation in global networks at relatively low cost.

Finding ways to provide students with "real-world" career-level work experiences, known as cooperative education, as a component of their journey to a bachelor's degree will give students a chance to earn while they learn and gain both knowledge and experience at the same time. This real-world career-level job for a student is much more than an internship – which can give only a limited glimpse into the world of work.

And, making use of underutilized facilities that already exist in communities can help bring students together for a no-frills approach to earning a bachelor's degree.

What's clear today is that there should not be just one kind of college education. Each kind comes with a different price tag – and delivers different services to shape an individual's future.

College may "not be for everyone," but as the complexity of the workplace and the demands of the global business world increase, college will need to be for far more people than are finishing a degree today.

In the Sacramento region, we must all work together to increase accessibility to the most fundamental outcome of a college education – workplace skills and competencies – and we should plan to strategically increase the presence of higher education from a wider variety of providers to satisfy the different needs and interests of our region's population.

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