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Viewpoints: 'Co-op' plan can help students enter the workforce

By Sandra Kirschenmann

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One of the most cherished ideals in California is our belief that "anybody can become somebody."

And one of the most successful vehicles for becoming that "somebody" and achieving the American dream is through higher education.

The state's Master Plan for Higher Education, focused on creating access to higher education, has resulted in a state system of excellent publicly funded colleges and universities that have few rivals.

However, in the last few years a disturbing new trend has developed: Students are completing bachelor's degrees but can't find jobs – both in California and nationwide.

It is the connection between a bachelor's degree and a good job that has been and will continue to be a primary reason to go to college. Since the Great Recession, the connection has been broken.

Unemployment rates for young people with bachelor's degrees have risen dramatically since 2007. And the true rate of unemployment among these graduates is obscured by a high rate of "mal-employment" – taking a job, any job, to pay the bills but not getting a job in the field that they want to pursue.

We all know someone with a new bachelor's degree who is a barista, a receptionist or a sales clerk. A recent Reuters poll found nearly 40 percent of college graduates are under- employed or mal-employed.

Creating access to education is no longer enough to effectively educate young people in today's economy. To help them achieve self-sufficiency and increase the likelihood of joining the workforce, another component should be added: job experience.

Higher education needs to provide students with an authentic connection to work experience and also focus on the networking skills that result in getting hired.

Students who participate in college requirements for full-time, real-life job experiences – often referred to as co-operative work experience or "co-op" – before they graduate, gain the ability to approach employers as job seekers who are both educated and experienced.

Co-op work experience doesn't mean an internship, which in many cases is a nonpaying, job-shadowing opportunity. Co-op involves paid, full-time employment for six months that employers offer to college students in a formal arrangement with universities. It builds a succession plan for the employer and a career-level work experience for students.

Another positive aspect of the co-op experience is that it helps students sort out the jobs that match their interests and skill sets. Students have an opportunity to "try out" a career for a few months while still in school, and discover whether or not they have the aptitude and temperament for that work.

If the co-op job is not the proper fit, students can quickly change majors and complete a degree program that leads to employment in a career field more suited for their skill set.

And the money earned – an average six-month co-op salary is more than \$16,000 – helps pay for school.

According to an ABC News report in 2012, an estimated 80 percent of job hires occur through networking. College students who participate in co-op work programs begin building networks in their co-op experiences.

The truth is that a great deal of one's ability to perform well in a job is learned at the job, not in the classroom. Co-op programs can give California higher education students a meaningful work experience that leads to the beginning of a successful career.

Although the California model for higher education is not broken, an update is needed. Higher education leaders should examine new ways to equip their students with the experience they need to dramatically enhance their education – and equip them for employment after graduation.

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