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Higher Education Reform: Overselling College and Underselling Learning Citizens League Committee Statement—Summary

Thomas Jefferson famously argued that an “informed electorate” was the foundation for self-governance in a democracy. There is no denying that the movement to a fast-paced, global knowledge economy has catapulted what it means to be “informed.”

Education—for *all* – is now indisputably the cornerstone of our economy and good citizenship. We define “higher education” as any formal education past high school, i.e., post-secondary education. There is increasingly no difference between the skills that make someone a good citizen (decision-making, problem-solving, communications, discernment, perseverance, etc.) and the skills that make a good employee or a good family member.

The purpose of learning beyond high school (higher education) is to advance society, by preparing individuals with the skills and knowledge needed not only to manage, but thrive in, modern conditions.

We propose that higher education must meet the following three challenges if it is to fulfill its role as facilitator of economic and social advancement:

1. 21st-century workers must possess the skills to “invent, adapt and reinvent” – both on the job and in their careers overall. We must ensure *all* students graduate from high school with a core set of “knowledge economy” skills, which includes critical thinking, problem solving and interpersonal skills. Institutions of higher education must add further skills and knowledge to assure that people can indeed, “invent, adapt and *reinvent*” in the face of the 21st-century’s ever changing environment.

2. Citizens need to have easy access to educational opportunities – both formal and informal – over the course of their lifetime. We need to develop a workforce and education system built around the idea that higher education is not a one-time, four-year experience, but, instead, is a continuum of educational experiences. We must create accessible entrance and exit ramps to affordable and productive learning opportunities.

3. Within the K-12 system (and beyond), students need help identifying, navigating and ultimately creating, career pathways. Most career counseling consists of “go to college, you’ll earn more money.” Students need more and better information about career and learning pathways that includes more hands-on, experiential learning and work-learn partnerships with employers. The goal should be to cultivate and nurture human capital by helping young people find a meaningful direction that fits their unique profile and help them start on their way.

Levers for Change. We believe that well-conceived actions in five key areas would possess the leverage to bring about meaningful reform: 1) money; 2) credentialing; 3) employers; 4) metrics; and 5) students. In Phase II, the Citizens League will design policies and/or products in one or more of these areas to meet the three challenges set forth above.

For more information and the full committee statement visit www.citizing.org/projects/highered

A Matter of Urgency

The outcomes we need from higher education are more important than ever. Yet the context in which higher education operates has changed mightily, in ways foundational to its role and how it functions. Moreover, these changes bring to bear an immediate and unrelenting pressure for *action*. The “societal premium” for advanced competencies, knowledge and skills is higher than ever, and we need these skill sets *now*.

- **Future economic growth is contingent on major productivity increases.** Minnesota is in the midst of a decline in the growth of the labor force, a decline that will continue for another twenty years. To replicate the average economic growth of the past four decades, we’ll need productivity growth that far surpasses what we’ve achieved over those same decades.
- **Segments of the population are un- or under-served.** Our collective success in the new economy will depend on everyone reaching their maximum potential. Yet, the achievement gap in educational levels between whites and non-whites or Latinos in Minnesota is among the worst in the nation.
- **Global competition is fierce.** The US economy is inextricably integrated into a single, global market for goods, information, workers and capital. Competitiveness matters; yet for example, in 2010 U.S. teens were 17th globally in science test scores and 24th in math.
- **Technology and globalization have upended work – and life – as we know it.** Rapid changes in the nature and structure of technology and the economy, and therefore jobs, make it unlikely that we can successfully predict the exact skills that will be needed in five or ten years. Lifelong employment in any given job, or even occupation, is increasingly uncertain.
- **Fiscal pressures on state governments will remain challenging for the foreseeable future.** Minnesota, like many states as well as the federal government, has a structurally imbalanced budget, primarily as a result of demographics— fewer workers paying taxes compared to retirees with health care costs. We can expect state sources of funding for higher education to be squeezed even more.
- **The cost of higher education and traditional structure of higher education no longer matches the needs of the student body.** 70% of undergraduate students fit a “non-traditional” profile: they are older, single parents, financially independent, have dependents, and/or attend part-time or work full-time. Completion rates are low (about 30% finish a 4-year degree in six years) and costs are soaring. College is increasingly out of reach for many families; we must find ways to get workers equipped with critical workforce skills via other means.
- **Employers are having difficulty finding workers with the right skills.** Even in the midst of a recession with the highest unemployment rates in decades, some jobs are going unfilled because employers are unable to find workers with the appropriate skill sets, and Minnesota is no exception. In an economy driven by productivity gains, we can no longer afford such mismatches; individuals not only need the ability to find a viable career path, but also to switch to another when necessary.