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What is UVSC's Proper Role in Utah System of Higher Education?

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BY DAVID R. KELLER



A democracy cannot function without a well-educated citizenry. Each time one steps into a polling booth, one needs the critical thinking skills required to analyze complex issues. Thomas Jefferson realized this, and advocated an expansive philosophy of education -- the liberal (that is, liberating) arts.

While the goal of this philosophy of education is not to provide job-specific training, the liberal arts are eminently practical because a broad-based understanding of our intellectual tradition is applicable to all aspects of one's private, public and professional lives. Knowledge promotes the happiness of the knower, and it enables the knower to be an active and contributing participant in civic life.

The challenge for Utah's higher education system is to provide access to quality liberal arts education. The search for Utah Valley State College's next president again has brought to the fore the question of what UVSC's proper role is within the state system.

One frequently voiced answer is that the higher education system should be comprised of a "flagship" research institution, a few baccalaureate liberal arts institutions and several community colleges offering primarily associate and technical degrees. If a community college student decides to pursue a bachelor degree, then she or he should transfer. Despite UVSC's steady evolution into a comprehensive liberal arts college, many argue the school should cease and desist expanding its mission and stick to its prior vocational/community college focus.

Upon careful consideration, however, it is clear that this view seriously neglects UVSC's responsibility to the taxpayers of Utah. There is a high demand for baccalaureate liberal arts at UVSC: In the fall semester 2000, for example, between two-thirds and three-quarters of students were enrolled in liberal arts courses. Since 1998, the number of students pursuing

bachelor degrees has increased 232 percent. The number of students who plan to transfer from UVSC has decreased 47 percent, while the number of students transferring to UVSC has grown 73 percent.

Perhaps most revealing, the number of students taking upper division courses has increased 145 percent.

Yet this surging demand for liberal education does not translate in the desire to migrate north; Utah County residents are especially rooted to their families and towns. Thus it is not surprising that scads

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of demographic evidence show that potential students would sooner give up pursuit of a baccalaureate degree than move to Salt Lake City or Ogden or Logan.

And because many students are married, have children and work full-time, it is simply not feasible to drive several hours two or three days a week. This amounts to more than 26,000 Utah County adults interested in pursuing baccalaureate education who are not willing to move or spend hundreds of hours commuting.

In the past, Brigham Young University met much of the community's demand for liberal education, but now the private school has highly selective admission standards. And even many persons of faith prefer a secular over a sectarian education. So, as the needs of Utah County change, so should UVSC's mission.

Achieving the status of a nationally recognized comprehensive college does not in any way compromise UVSC's mission as an open-enrollment community college with applied technology programs, nor does it require university status, as many incorrectly assume.

For these reasons, hemming in UVSC to its former narrow, vocational/community college focus fails to recognize UVSC's crucial role within Utah's system of higher education. Institutions of higher education have vitally important duties to the communities they serve.

Unless UVSC continues to develop into a high-quality, comprehensive liberal arts college, like Weber State, it will fall far short of its social responsibility.

David R. Keller teaches philosophy and is the director of the Center for the Study of Ethics at Utah Valley State College in Orem.



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