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Colleges must offer their students a full education



BY WILLIAM D. ADAMS

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It's commencement season. For the next several weeks, America's colleges and universities will celebrate their graduates, most of them young people at the beginning of their participation in our society.

As a former college president who now leads a federal agency focused on the humanities, I have thought a good deal about what colleges and universities can and should do to help undergird our democracy – and it all starts with the ways we educate for citizenship.

Recently, I gave the commencement address at Miami Dade College, one of the largest and most diverse community colleges in the nation. The graduating class of 1,200 at the Wolfson and Hialeah campuses is representative of the entire college – roughly 60 percent Hispanic and 30 percent black, and including immigrants from 67 countries.

I felt privileged to watch from the stage as the graduates and their families cheered during a parade of flags from their homelands: Colombia and Cuba, Venezuela, Haiti, Nicaragua, other countries in Central and South America, Africa, Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

But nothing prepared me for the emotional display that came when the final flag, the American flag, crossed the stage with its color guard. The response from the crowd was thunderous, expressing, more eloquently than anything said at the dais that day, how important the country is to these young citizens and their families, as well as the pride, hope and sacrifice that carried the graduates to that moment. I have never witnessed a more moving demonstration of patriotism.

My view from that stage underscored my admiration for President Obama's plan to subsidize community college tuition, but not for the reasons cited by most who support the initiative. Like them, I care about vocational and technical education that prepares workers for jobs across all sectors. But when we focus solely on these colleges as workforce pipelines, we miss the deeper and more profound impact they have on the future of our democracy.

The student body at Miami Dade College is the harbinger of the America that is now emerging in places like Miami, New York, Los Angeles, Phoenix and Seattle. How well we do as a democracy in the coming decades will have a great deal to do with the success of places like Miami Dade.

Community colleges are forging citizens, many from disadvantaged backgrounds and communities in this country and beyond. These students must graduate with not only the passion for citizenship that I saw on display in Miami, but with the tools to be productive and dedicated participants in the public realm.

As they do that work, these institutions must be supported in their efforts to produce citizens as well as technicians. This means ensuring they have the resources to support strong course offerings in American history, in the philosophical underpinnings of the Republic, in our political institutions and processes, and in the important social and political challenges of contemporary life.

A recent Humanities Indicators report notes that humanities concentrations among community college graduates is on the increase, and that's a good thing. Work readiness matters, but it is only part of the picture and only part of the mission of our community colleges. Here as elsewhere in our educational system, we must not abandon the ambition of educating the whole person.

The leaders of community colleges and their faculty are strongly committed to the idea of the education of the whole person, and especially of citizens. But they need to hear from business leaders, educators and public officials that we share their commitment and support their efforts in this critically important ambition.

This means that we must acknowledge that our community colleges are doing something more and more significant and complex than vocational training. It also means ensuring that state legislatures and relevant federal programs direct their expectations and resources toward the requirements of active democratic citizenship. Parents need to be supportive of their students as they explore topics not directly related to preparation for occupations. And we all need to put the aims and needs of democratic citizenship at the top of the list of what we expect our community colleges to achieve.

The success of our democracy depends on it.

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