Is Maine developing a work force for its future?

By Joseph McDonnell, Special to the BDN

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Last week, Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce released “The College Payoff,” a report that answers the question “what is a college degree worth?”

Of course, a college degree cannot be measured solely by its earning power because developing the mind is its own reward. But looked at in monetary terms, a college graduate earns 84 percent more over a lifetime than a high school graduate — a statistic that makes a college education a great investment.

The report points out differences in earning potential among graduates with different college majors, with those in more technical areas like science, technology, health, engineering, math and business earning more than majors in other fields.

Though jobs today are scarce, those with a college degree are far more likely to find employment. Last year, this same Georgetown Center estimated that by 2018, 59 percent of jobs in the state of Maine will require post-secondary education. It projected that there will be 196,000 new vacancies, the result of job creation, retirements and other factors, and 115,000 of those jobs will require a degree.

And yet the Maine Compact for Higher Education reported that only 37 percent of the state’s working-age adults currently hold a college degree compared to 47 percent in New England. The Lumina Foundation forecasts that Maine’s degree attainment rate will only reach 44 percent by 2025.

It’s simple math; we need to increase the percentage of working adults with college degrees to meet the demands of our state economy. And we must provide our graduates with the right type of education to be marketable.

Any plan that seeks to increase the number of college-educated workers will have to consider the significant obstacles facing many Maine residents who want to obtain a degree, including finding time to balance work and school, securing the resources to pay tuition and gaining access to a college campus from remote parts of the state. Maine’s leaders must put a high priority on overcoming these barriers to higher education — to allocate the necessary resources to prepare the next generation for the future.
The University of Southern Maine and other universities in the state are investing in Maine’s economic future by offering increased opportunities for online learning, a combination of classroom and distance learning, and multiple forms of financial aid, including educational loans, grants, scholarships and work-study programs. The university also offers degree completion programs with accelerated courses and credit for life and work experiences for the 22 percent of workers in Maine who have some college credit, but no degree.

While institutions of higher education throughout the state strive to make college more accessible, we must also consider the type of education that will best prepare graduates for this new economy.

As the Georgetown study demonstrated, graduates with degrees in technical areas are in more demand than those in the liberal arts. But ironically, as New York Times columnist Adam Bryant discovered after interviewing more than 70 CEOs, many of the qualities business leaders look for in new employees resemble the skills and values more typically associated with a liberal arts education — critical thinking, communication skills and creativity in solving problems.

If we juxtapose these two sets of requirements for the work force of the future, schools from kindergarten to graduate schools will have to rethink the way we prepare students for this economy. First, we need to provide our students with educations in science, math, health, engineering and business to provide necessary work force skills for a highly technological society.

But we also will need to provide students with a liberal arts education to help them develop a broader perspective, to learn how to innovate, to communicate, to work effectively with others and to exhibit cultural sensitivity to respond to a fast-moving global economy. To offer our students such an integrated education, we will have to break down the high walls in academia to create programs that bring together the arts, humanities, social sciences and professional programs.

There are some good models for this new type of education. Many university business programs have responded to this need and have changed their curricula to provide students with a broader education, including having students study business alongside another discipline. The best business programs not only teach the fundamental business subjects but prepare students to think creatively, communicate effectively and to lead teams of diverse employees.

To prepare for Maine’s future, government, business and community leaders must find realistic ways for more of the state’s residents to obtain a college education. And educators must do our part by creating imaginative programs that infuse professional studies with a broader perspective to develop future leaders.

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