USF sets a global agenda

By RENU KHATOR Special to the Times
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American universities must prepare students for the flat world!

The new Strategic Plan unveiled by the University of South Florida was drafted in the context of some very sobering realities. America ranks 12th in the world in higher education attainment of its population, and trends indicate that its ranking will continue to drop over the years. At a time when the knowledge-based economy is demanding more college graduates with higher math and science skills, American universities are graduating fewer students in science and engineering. China graduates four times as many engineers as the United States and, to make matters worse, only 6 percent of U.S. high school seniors taking college entrance exam show any interest in engineering.

Out of 17-million students enrolled in 4,292 colleges and universities across the United States, three-fourths are in public institutions. American higher education is very much a public issue and, given these disturbing trends, the public must ask three important questions: Who is coming to universities? Who is graduating from universities? And with what skills are they graduating?

Who is coming to universities? Not all who could or should enroll, and among those who do, not all are prepared to succeed. An alarmingly large number of African-Americans, Hispanics, first-generation Americans and poor students are unable to reach college. At a time when the United States needs every ounce of its innovative power to stay competitive in the world, we are allowing a significant amount of our intellectual capital go untapped.

The picture is more perplexing if we contrast college preparedness of American students with their international counterparts. American eighth-graders rank 15th in the industrialized world on math achievement but 12th-graders rank at the bottom of the barrel. According to the 2002 Nation's Report Card, only 17 percent of high school seniors have math proficiency and only 36 percent are proficient in English.

Universities are hard pressed for funds, yet are forced to redirect approximately $1-billion in remedial courses taken by 40 percent of their freshmen. A Chronicle of Higher Education study claims that only 44 percent of college professors think freshmen come ready for college-level math and science, while more than 90 percent of high school teachers feel that they are sending their students prepared. Universities have an obligation to work with the school system to close the gap.

Who is graduating from universities? Fewer men than women, fewer African-Americans and Hispanics than whites, and fewer first-generation students than others. Overall, only two-thirds of full-time students complete their graduation in six years. The "survival rate" in American universities is one of the lowest in the industrialized world.

Finally, we must ask - with what skills are our students graduating? Will they be able to survive and thrive in the global economy? Will they be able to find their distinct yet interdependent place in this multicultural world? Once again, statistics speak volumes: Only 10 percent of college graduates are globally prepared, 13 percent have foreign language proficiency and less than 34 percent take at least one international studies course.

"We remained so far ahead of our competitors for so long ... that we began to take our postsecondary superiority for granted. The results of this inattention, though little known to many of our fellow citizens, are sobering," says a recent report commissioned by Education Secretary Margaret Spellings.

Clearly, a new vision, a new leadership and a new approach are necessary. History tells us that American higher education reached its zenith by providing the environment for faculty and students that fostered unprecedented levels of creativity and practical application. Early foundations of some of the best American universities were laid on this very principle.

The USF Strategic Plan seeks to translate bold vision, leadership and a new approach into action. The plan redefines student success in the global arena by exposing them to global forces, diverse environment and entrepreneurial experiences. By aspiring to membership in the Association of American Universities, USF is promising to offer its students an environment which will train them to lead, not just succeed, in the global economy. This exposure will give an edge to all our students, including those who choose to live in our region. With their understanding of the global forces, they will be able to keep the regional economy at the cutting edge of innovation.

Our students deserve nothing but the very best and USF, with your partnership, is ready to meet this challenge.

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