

PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION: PENNY WISE AND POUND FOOLISH?

Monte Bute

I've given hundreds of talks over the past 35 years but not one has been as personally satisfying as the commencement address I gave last month at the Minnesota Correctional Facility in Red Wing. As I stood before that assembly, I turned to the 10 members of the graduating class and shared my secret: nearly 44 years ago, I too had received my high school diploma there, behind what Bob Dylan once called the "Walls of Red Wing."

If anyone in 1963 had predicted that Monte Bute would one day be testifying before a Minnesota House committee as a professor at a state university, my former teachers, classmates and fellow citizens of Jackson, Minnesota, would have suggested that you were a few cards short of a full deck.

So how did this improbable chain of events come to pass? After being paroled, I headed for the Twin Cities and soon found myself making note pads in the basement of the Pillsbury Company. By chance, I met a company attorney who took a paternal interest in me. One day he said: "Kid, you really aren't as stupid as you sometimes appear to be. Have you ever thought about going to college?"

Austin Junior College, here I come. Even for a long shot like me, it was a chance worth taking. They had open admissions and tuition was the semester equivalent of \$7.50 per credit hour. In what turned out to be a most fortuitous twist of fate, I signed up for a humanities course with a man named Rodney Kellar. He saw in me a potential that had been invisible to my family, my K-12 teachers and, most of all, myself. For the next couple of years, he became my teacher and intellectual mentor, buffing off some of my rough edges and polishing my raw talent.

Returning to the Twin Cities, I enrolled at a new junior college that had just opened on the third floor of Minneapolis Central High—now known as Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC). The price was right. Tuition was the semester equivalent of \$8.25

per credit hour. Once again, fortune smiled upon me. The first class I took was with Audrey Parrish. With her generous and learned tutelage, I finished my junior college career as an honors student.

I was admitted to the University of Minnesota in the fall of 1967, where tuition was the semester equivalent of \$10.00 per credit hour. I expressed my heartfelt gratitude to professors Kellar and Parrish in the only way I then knew how: that first term at the U of M I received straight A's, a perfect 4.0 GPA.

I share this personal story to put before you both a human face and a sense of history. First off, if I were to be paroled from a correctional facility today, the chances of my acquiring the public education needed to become a college professor would be little better than my chances of winning the Minnesota State Lottery. The \$7.50 per credit hour I paid in 1963 at Austin has jumped to more than \$130; the \$8.25 per credit hour I paid in 1965 at MCTC has spiraled to more than \$141; the \$10.00 per credit hour I paid in 1967 at the University of Minnesota has soared to \$275.

Without question, inflation has played a role in this mind-boggling rise in tuition. However, inflation is little more than an accessory to this crime. When it comes to ever-increasing tuition rates in Minnesota, the crime scene is the State Capitol.

In the early 1980's, the state's share of public higher education was 80 percent, with students picking up the other 20 percent. For the next two decades, the state share was roughly two-thirds of the cost while students had to cover one-third. Since 2002, public college students and their families have been swamped by a tuition tsunami: the state's commitment to sharing college costs has shrunk to 50 percent.

Students at the state universities seldom come from privileged backgrounds. They are far more likely to be from moderate or low-income families who struggle just to make ends meet. Make no mistake; these students are as intelligent and capable as their counterparts at private

colleges or the University of Minnesota. However, our students routinely confront difficult life circumstances.

They work far too many hours, usually at low wages, face conflicting family obligations, take more credits than they can handle and, given the state's tuition policy, end up with debt that seems as insurmountable as that of the Ford Motor Company. In Minnesota, quality education should not be limited to the well-to-do.

Given the competing demands of high tuition, work, family and school, our students are probably doing as well as could be expected. Nevertheless, these no-win choices that students come up against may well be limiting their future opportunities. If they choose to short-change their studies, will they achieve the level of proficiency that savvy employers require?

Peter D. Hart Research Associates recently conducted a nationwide study of over 300 employers, companies where 25 percent or more of their new hires hold at least a bachelor's degree. "Fully 63% of business executives interviewed agree that too many recent college graduates do not have the skills to be successful in today's global economy."

If you listen to most business lobbyists, you'd think individual employers were only seeking employees with vocational or professional training. In truth, a solid majority of executives in the Hart study believe that a college education should provide a balance between a well-rounded education *and* the knowledge and skills of a specialty.

In a focus group interview, a Milwaukee business executive said that "the well-rounded portion of what I got in college is what really served me a lot better than anything I learned in my electrical engineering degree."

This study also revealed that the skills employers most desire in new hires are 1) teamwork skills, 2) critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills, and 3) oral and written communication skills. When these business leaders were asked what type of undergraduate

college education they would recommend to a young person they know, three in four (76%) said they would suggest a liberal education.

The British novelist Doris Lessing once made a forthright assessment of how difficult it would be in the 21st century for political leaders and educators to foster education for the long term:

All the pressures go the other way, towards learning only what is immediately useful, what is functional. More and more the demand is for people to be educated to function in an almost certainly temporary stage of technology. Education for the short term. We have to look at the word “useful” again. In the long run what is useful is what survives, revives, comes to life in different contexts.

Thanks to professors like Rod Kellar and Audrey Parrish, I received a useful education for the long run. And thanks too, to those visionary political leaders of the 1960’s and 1970’s, whose long-term investment in my generation’s higher education continues to pay high dividends for the state of Minnesota. I ask state legislators today to do no less for our children, and for our children’s children.

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