

There is no substitute for the in-person experience on a college campus



David Schmidly

I grew up on a small farm in a rural area, attended a segregated school system, and was the first person in my family to attend college.

Neither of my parents were college educated but both believed it was the best way for me to escape that small farm environment.

So, in 1962 I entered a nearby university, not knowing what to expect.

My only trips there had been with my father to attend football or basketball games, and he always made the point that someday I would go there. I was able to attend because the price was affordable -- \$50 a semester tuition!.

My classes and the professors who taught me changed my life. Under their guidance, I experienced hands-on learning opportunities that I never thought possible. After nine years of undergraduate and graduate education, I received a faculty position at a prominent university where I taught and mentored students both in and out of the classroom. Then, I served in various administrative positions, including president of three major public universities.

My point is this: Higher education and the full dimension of university experience with faculty and my fellow students changed my life, as it has for millions of others. Now, in this era of social and economic inequality with racial unrest, we need it more than ever. Students need on-campus interactions with fellow students, professors, and colleagues. No form of online education can replace this form of leadership development.

While I understand the financial upheaval caused by the virus pandemic, the importance of keeping students, faculty, and employees safe, and the short-term emergency need to shift to online instruction, I am concerned about a continued shift in that direction if universities begin to see it as the major way to expand enrollment and revenues. Despite these opportunities, I urge university leaders to remain

vigilant about the important roles of both faculty mentoring and hands-on experiential learning. These are the "gold standard" of American higher education. Don't throw these things out with the "bathwater." Administrators and faculty should fight hard to see that they remain at the center of university education.

Many of higher education's problems started decades ago when it became fashionable to replace state and federal funding for education with tuition dollars. As a result, many students, especially from the lower economic strata, were priced out of the opportunity or had to accept large debt to achieve their goals. We can change these things if we elect future leaders with a different set of values and who embrace the importance of equal opportunity for all citizens. An inexpensive liberal education, with the complete university experience, remains one of the best ways to achieve these goals.

Yes, higher ed needs to change. The best way to start would be for public colleges and universities to become more affordable and truly public again. There is a need for universities to reduce costs and become more accessible, to invest more in career development for students to maximize their employment opportunities, and to implement virtual learning for some types of classes where amenable. But the university should not turn its back on face-to-face experiential learning and a broad liberal education designed to produce better citizens, among all demographic strata, with the values, experiences, empathy, and skills capable of leading this country through the 21st century. Of all the problems we face as a society, education is the one solution that applies to each of them. Education increases the probability that a society will become socially conscious and enhances the willingness to promote the changes necessary to ensure that we truly are a democracy.

David J. Schmidly is past president of the University of New Mexico, Oklahoma State University, and Texas Tech University. He lives in Placitas, New Mexico. (Note: This op-ed originally appeared in the Albuquerque Journal).