Another Generation's Great Expectations

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Great expectations are hallmarks of our times.

Putting a man on the moon was a great expectation that shaped an earlier generation. Erasing inequities, curing cancer, and preserving the environment are emblematic of the great expectations that drive society today.

Those who serve in and benefit from higher education have "greater expectations," as described by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), whose October 2002 report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, compares the skills students acquire as part of their education and the skills that are being increasingly demanded of them in 21st-century work environments – skills, the report says, that go beyond factual knowledge.

Change defines our times.

Change is also a hallmark of our times. Many of the changes that define our times – such as globalization – have been catalyzed by information technology. Technology has stimulated the economy and improved lives by facilitating breakthroughs in existing industries as well as facilitating the creation of new industries. It has changed where, how, what, and when we learn. And it has led to a new type of worker whose value hinges on education, creativity, and information technology.

For many, high expectations, change, and information technology are linked to education. According to Ted Hullar of Atlantic Philanthropies, employers are depending on a better-skilled workforce to stay competitive. "As companies change direction to take advantage of new opportunities or new technologies, employees are asked to develop new skills, competencies, and approaches." says Hullar. "There is no question that lifelong learning has become a necessity."

So what does society need from higher education?

That question is being asked – and answered – by the *Futures Project* of Brown University. According to project director Frank Newman, the list of society's needs is long, but three needs stand out: an ever-more-skilled workforce (more than just vocationalism, it's the ability to "outthink the rest of the world"), greater civic understanding and commitment, and social mobility. Higher education has shaped the socioeconomic structure of American society.

Particularly today, it has become an important requirement for full participation in society and is the ticket to entrée into the middle class. As a result, it is crucial that this opportunity be provided for the less advantaged.

Too often, however, what society needs from higher education is assumed but not explained. By exploring the priorities set out by these and other initiatives, we gain better insight into the role of higher education.

Skilled workforce. Higher education has become a necessity for building a satisfying life and career. In *The Rise of the Creative Class*, author Richard Florida writes that roughly 30 percent of all employed people today "engage in complex problem solving that involves a great deal of independent judgment and requires high levels of education or human capital." At the same time, companies are asking more and more employees to take what they know and apply it to situations both creatively and rationally. And yet, according to the AAC&U's *Greater Expectations* report, "There is a looming shortage of exactly the employees needed by the knowledge-based economy: college-educated people with mental agility and adaptability."

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Civic commitment and understanding. In the same way as a vibrant economy demands an educated workforce, a healthy society needs educated citizens. Education helps citizens parse problems and evaluate issues, thereby making them better able – perhaps even more willing – to contribute to the improvement of society. According to the AAC&U: "A democracy's success flows directly from the thoughtful participation of an informed citizenry. When people are well educated, they tend to participate more in their communities and to vote. Knowledgeable, empathetic members of society help ensure enlightened political decisions."

Social mobility. In a country founded on the principles of equity and equality, the opportunity to better oneself is a deeply held belief. As society has changed, that opportunity depends increasingly on access to quality education. According to Newman, the United States has a long tradition of using higher education as a vehicle for encouraging social mobility. For example, in 1830 Oberlin College became the first institution of higher education to admit women as well as men. Seventeen years later, City College of New York was established to serve students from low-income families. Less than 20 years after that, the Land Grant Act provided access to education for the sons and daughters of the laboring class. Shortly thereafter, the first historically black colleges were created. Access swelled with the GI bill and again in the late 1960s with expansion of the community college movement.

There is an opportunity ahead of us.

Used wisely, information technology can support and extend higher education's ability to serve society. It can strengthen the powers of discovery in virtually all disciplines – whether in the area of science, technology, engineering, or the humanities. It can enhance student learning by enabling faculty to create more-engaging content and by providing a vehicle for student-faculty and peer interaction and collaboration. It can facilitate simulation and visualization, through which students can experience situations – such as historical events, medical procedures, and environmental disasters – and then use and build on the knowledge gained. In addition, it streamlines and facilitates the business areas of education, such as finance, course management, and student services. And it can improve access to education through distance-learning programs. The expectation is that information technology will play an even greater role in the future.

Newman reminds us that: "The task at hand is more than extending the current mode of higher education to an ever-expanding share of the population. The demands for a more effective higher education for every student are greater than ever before, and it is time for real change."

There are great expectations of American higher education.

Without a doubt, education is a critical element in how we fare as individuals and as a society. But the responsibility is not higher education's alone. It will take all of us – business, government, and education – to ensure that higher education can meet those expectations.

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