Condemnation of higher education over the top
By Tim Summerlin
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Let me admit something. I mistrust people who have all the answers and people who have sorted the world out between sheep and goats. Much of our negative attitude toward Beltway politics stems, I believe, from weariness with political parties always in campaign mode and thus seemingly more interested in how to work an issue to the advantage of one’s party rather than in how to solve problems for the good of the nation.

Sometimes we even go beyond “them and us” into carving up “us and us.” Thus, when a party wins control, it becomes time to cut out the “partially pure” from the “wholly pure.” The ancient Gnostics had nothing on us.

But what has all that got to do with the work of a university president? For me, the connection exists in the way that American higher education has been portrayed in the media in recent months. You have seen the charges: American colleges have fallen behind the rest of the world ... students graduate without basic skills ... colleges leave students in deep debt ... accreditors fail to keep colleges accountable ... American colleges are incapable of change.

Let me first say that I am convinced that American higher education is at a crossroads where academic outcomes, cost, accessibility and adaptation to learning in the digital age all come together to create a serious challenge. Never has it been more essential to review our goals, practices and results. And we need honest critics from outside and inside of the academy to help us do that.

Categorical condemnations, however, are clumsy and unhelpful. For instance, college debt is a serious matter, and many for-profit institutions in particular are rightly being called to account for their recruiting practices. But those practices do not reflect the values by which the vast majority of colleges have operated.

And America faces a massive task in providing college access to all who can benefit from it. But, in fact, many public and private institutions across the country have taken creative leadership in admitting and graduating diverse student populations.

The list of issues goes on. Defining competencies for baccalaureate degree holders is a legitimate subject for debate, but rigid standards issued from Washington are not consistent with the creativity and diversity essential to learning.
It really isn’t “just that simple,” and truth lies beyond a campaign slogan or cure-all concept. Let's insist that American higher education continuously improve. After all, we of all institutions should be committed to life-long learning. Where we are arthritic, we must become nimbler. Where true abuse occurs, it should be condemned and eliminated. But an institution still the world’s envy for its ability to serve a diverse student population, in great part because its own diversity promotes innovation, is not a failure, nor does it need to be “saved” by new forms of regimentation.

In education as in other areas of life, it is essential to distinguish between healthy criticism and the sweeping condemnation whose main appeal is sensationalism.

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