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Higher Education

This month's column can be dairy related if you try real hard. The start of a new school year has begun in many parts of the country. We only have one left at home and he started a few weeks ago. Many of you took your recent high school graduates and dropped them off at a university. This column is to help you understand the reality of what is going to happen to your young student and why. I also hope to help parents who are not as familiar with the process and hopefully save you some time and money. I want to discuss who is educating your kids, the applicability of their education and ways to save money and not incur student loan debt.

Counting my time as an undergraduate, graduate school and as a university faculty member, I have been involved in higher education for almost 25 years. Granted, the time as an undergrad is still a little hazy so I am not sure those years are worthy to count. Anyway, from the time I began as a freshman in college there have been many changes not only in the way classes are taught but also in price. Every parent should know that the majority of university professors have never had a job outside of academia. They have done a bachelors degree, a master's degree then a Ph.D all concurrent. This has led to university faculty that by and large do not have a strong grasp on what happens in the real world. I have had some very interesting conversations with other faculty about the application of some of the research that is happening at universities. The other thing that happens when a person has not been outside of the university is they tend to develop some strange ideas about life and the world around us. The purpose of telling you this is that you need to know that these same people will be working tirelessly every single class to convince your young person that their ideas are what they should believe. It is often too late to decompress our kids because we may not see them again until Thanksgiving and these faculty have had 2 months to shape your student's mind toward their way of thinking. Granted, this is not true about each and every professor but it is the majority of those teaching courses at Division 1 universities.

Many professors that are teaching your kids have not ever had to earn a living doing that discipline. I question whether they can effectively teach your kids how to earn a living in the discipline if they do not have experience? Some of the most effective teaching courses are labs. Many schools are removing lab experiences because they are too expensive to teach. Labs are the classes where students get hands on experience that can translate into experience that can facilitate the opportunity for a job after graduation. I found the labs to be the time when I could actually connect with students because they were usually segmented into smaller student numbers than the lecture portion of the class. Students stay in school and do well when they connect well with peers and faculty. We should all be vocal toward universities regarding the importance of laboratory experiences in all classes. One example is that many animal science departments that have removed labs from animal reproduction. It is impossible to teach AI or ultrasonography in a lecture setting from a power point slide.

I am often asked how to push for change in this area. The most effective way is not send your students to schools that do not have labs. Departments receive funding based on the number student so if the number starts to decline then they will start to examine why.

All universities have core courses that every major is required to take. Many of these courses are repeats of the same material they had in high school. These courses are also taught very effectively and sometimes at half the price at community colleges. A wise strategy is to take these courses at a community college at a lower tuition rate and often better teachers. Then transfer to a 4 year university to complete the degree. Online courses are an option but are often more expensive than traditional campus courses and many would question their effectiveness.

We consistently hear in the media about the student loan crisis in the United States. I am amazed how many parents believe their student must graduate in 4 years. Please hear this, your student does NOT have to graduate in 4 years. In fact, I would submit they would learn more in 5 years versus 4. I always counseled families and students by asking about finances before they started school. Even if parents had planned well and had the money for their student's college I always suggested that the student work while in school. A part time job is all part of the learning process. Working will teach the meaning of work in exchange for money. A job will help the student learn how to work with others to achieve a common goal. In unique situations part time jobs become full time jobs after graduation. If a parent does not have the money, it is ok for the student to help with paying for college! Sometimes a part time job that is not enjoyable serves as motivation for the student to finish college so they can get a better job.

It is ok for a student to take more time to graduate because they have to fund all or a portion of their education. He or she does not have to borrow money to reach the same endpoint of a bachelor's degree. Young advisors who have just graduated themselves and probably have debt will tell you that your student should borrow money and you as a parent can take out a parent loan. Please, do not believe it, your student can complete a degree without debt. It may take a while and be different from many of his/her peers but it can be done. If your student can get out without debt, that will help the bottom line every day.