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The Importance of Quality

By: **David Fuller**

Higher education must continue to demonstrate that it is responsible to our state and communities to address many demands. In the current debate about the value and cost of higher education, we shouldn't lose sight of one of the most essential demands — quality student learning. That's not to say that most observers of higher education - critics and defenders alike - are not concerned about learning. Most recognize the importance of learning science and math, the ability to read critically, civic knowledge and the ability to contribute as citizens, ethical actions, and effective writing and speaking. But we've got to be careful that this learning doesn't get overshadowed in our important discussions about student access, affordability and degree completion. What I suggest is that we spend considerably more time and resources figuring out how we ensure and improve student learning and success. Completion rates, access and cost are virtually meaningless if we don't ensure that our students learn the best of what we know and practice. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) argues that to "regain our position as a world leader, the United States now must work both to increase degree attainment and to improve significantly the breadth, level and quality of students' actual learning." AAC&U urges that all of us "commit to civic, ethical and intercultural learning as institutional priorities." And the calls for that type of learning are not merely coming from educators, they are coming loud and clear from employers who recognize the essential role learning plays in their businesses and organizations. A 2009 survey of 302 employers revealed that a large percentage of these owners and executives believed that colleges should emphasize more the knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and applied learning. Specifically, the survey showed that 70 percent indicated that colleges should do a better job placing more emphasis on science and technology, 67 percent on global issues, 89 percent on written and oral communications, 81 percent on critical thinking and analytic reasoning, 75 percent on complex problem solving, 75 percent on ethical decision making, and 79 percent on applied knowledge in real-world settings. At this time, as we continue to discuss and debate the role of higher education and the job it does or doesn't do, it is essential that significantly more attention is paid to the sciences, mathematics, humanities and other general and liberal education curricula, field-based learning activities, and interdisciplinary studies that engage students in cross-disciplinary and global studies. While at the same time, we need to make sure that students' experiences in our classrooms are rigorous, challenging, meaningful and valuable for their growth as citizens and individuals. Making that happen is not cheap, but as the educator and former administrator Derek Bok emphasizes, "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." In my view, all of us in higher education, and policy makers and leaders who are keenly interested in education, should include in our debates about education the essential role quality learning plays. We need to work hard to ensure access to effective college studies and assisting students in the rewarding efforts to complete their degrees.

For the sake of our students, the support of higher education is well worth all of our efforts. FULLER is the president of Minot State University and Dakota College at Bottineau.