

Guest opinion: The enduring importance of higher education

By Roger Pielke, Jr.

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Speaking over the weekend to a conservative group in Michigan, Republican presidential contender Rick Santorum tried to score a few points at the expense of higher education: "President Obama once said he wants everybody in America to go to college. What a snob." In the process of trying to characterize the President as an elitist, Mr. Santorum also displayed fundamental lack of appreciation for the importance of nation's colleges and universities in the American economy and culture.

Visions of monastic campuses where out-of-touch professors lecture on obscure topics have been used for centuries to poke fun at academia. However, in the more-than 4,400 American universities and colleges across the United States today, such a vision could not be further from the realities of modern campus life.

For instance, a college degree is a reliable ticket to a good-paying and secure job. In 2011, the U.S. for the first time saw more than 30 percent of its adult population holding at least a bachelor's degree. Increasing demand for higher education is a matter of simple economics: median pay for those with a bachelor's degree was 70 percent higher than those with just a high school diploma. Even more significantly, during the peak of the economic crisis those without a high school diploma saw their unemployment rates reach almost 18 percent whereas those with at least a bachelor's degree saw unemployment rates top out at just 5.6 percent.

Higher education contributes to the workforce not simply because students spend their time reading Chaucer or Euclid. Instead, the modern American university has, from its beginnings, been closely tied to training for participation in the economy. President Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Act in 1862 to establish land grant universities across the country to support the nation's needs in agriculture and mining. Today, many universities have well-established professional programs in medicine, law, engineering and business, and continue to expand their offerings with unique specialties in areas as diverse as hotel management, viticulture and

professional golf management -- alongside more traditional professional training in dental hygiene, legal assistance and graphic design.

Universities are also key players in the nation's innovation ecosystem, conducting about 14 percent of the nation's total research and development, with corporate support for university research growing over the past decade. University research goes well beyond traditional notions of "basic research" far from application. For instance, a 2011 study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found universities to be among the key public institutions which had discovered 153 new drugs and vaccines approved by the Food and Drug Administration over the past 30 years, with the University of California second overall to the National Institutes of Health. In fact, universities have struggled to manage the successes that have resulted from frequent commercial success resulting from on-campus work.

Research and education aside, the single most obvious flaw in Rick Santorum's labeling of President Obama a "snob" for expressing support for higher education is the seeming incongruity of major college athletics finding a comfortable home in many of our most academically successful universities. In 1929 the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching observed, "nothing in the educational regime of our higher institutions perplexes the European visitor so much as the role that organized athletic play." Like viticulture and dental hygiene, the operation by universities of pseudo-professional sports franchises does not square with the image of the university as an ivory tower inhabited by effete scholars. But big-time college athletes, uniquely American, do square with core national values reflected by the modern university, including the virtues of competition, striving for excellence and a sincere belief that we can always make ourselves better.

Given how much Americans like to make money, remain employed, benefit from ongoing innovation and participate in the annual March Madness basketball selection pools, good advice for any aspiring presidential candidate would be to not put yourself on the wrong side of core American values.

Roger Pielke Jr. is a professor in the Environmental Studies Program at the University of Colorado.