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## Higher education: More essential now than ever

By Newsday Readers/letters@newsday.com

Newsday Readers

letters@newsday.com In higher education, we teach that honest perspective only comes with a strong effort to understand both sides of a debate. As educators, we encourage healthy dialogue and exchange of ideas. But we have never faced the kind of storm that is brewing today that casts higher education in a negative light.

This perception is despite average tuition (compared to other major expenses) remaining relatively flat at most public institutions. Many colleges also have adopted a stronger focus on career development, and efforts have increased to enhance equity and accessibility.

Yet higher education has become an even larger target. A notion has emerged that higher education is designed to drive young, malleable minds to embed social concepts at odds with what some may consider mainstream views, and a perception that faculty seek to persuade students to abandon independent thinking. To the contrary.

As a biologist and throughout my career at universities in six states as faculty, department chair, dean, provost, and now president, I've seen that the best professors guide students to think critically, to carefully explore and consider data, to dive into all sides of a debate, and to best understand content based on established and proven facts, and to do all this before they make up their own minds.

We have entered an age when artificial intelligence, social media, and opinion-based commentary can draw our attention in ways that should demand critical analysis and thinking. This is where a college education has never been more important.

Degree programs in both discipline-focused content and liberal arts complement the education of a well-informed citizen and promote honest inquiry into what we hear and read. Does it make a difference? Yes. Those with a college degree are employed in higher numbers and significantly out-earn those without a degree, in both short- and long-term earnings.

With the serious challenges we face locally, nationally, and globally, higher education has never been more essential. We are at a critical moment, when we need to pursue a balance between acknowledging potential gaps and challenges of higher education, while recognizing its value and ensuring the continuation of the transformative power that helps shape an informed and thoughtful citizenry for future generations.

- Robert S. Prezant, Farmingdale

The writer is president of Farmingdale State College.

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