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Importance of Higher Education - Column by SWOSU President Randy Beutler

I would like to visit with you about the importance of higher education to our nation, state and communities.

At a recent forum, I was asked a question that seems simple but is not: "Why do we as a state subsidize higher education at all?" I would like to share my answer and delve into the premise of the question more thoroughly, by using one program at Southwestern Oklahoma State University.

I hope that all of us understand and appreciate the need for good, qualified nurses in rural, western Oklahoma. They are essential to the health and safety of our citizens and are in great demand in our rural hospitals. There is clearly a need.

At SWOSU, we take great pride in our Department of Nursing and Allied Health Sciences. Our Department of Nursing offers an online degree program that allows Registered Nurses (R.N.) to complete a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (B.S.N.) degree. This is a program for nurses that already hold an Associate's degree in nursing from an accredited nursing program. We also offer a traditional B.S.N. degree program and an online Master of Science in nursing degree.

These healthcare profession degrees, like most professional degrees, are very costly to operate. Suffice to say, our students cannot afford to pay what the full cost of these degree programs cost SWOSU and the state of Oklahoma. Students would have a hard time paying off their student loans or even entering the programs if we were to charge the true, full cost of the program.

Therefore, many years ago, the founders of this state decided that it was in the best interest of the community as a whole to subsidize education. Therefore, the taxpayers invest their money in these programs and then have access to quality medical care.

You may now take that example and extrapolate it out to all the various other programs that are offered at SWOSU. It could be teachers, lab technicians, law enforcement, technical engineers, pharmacists, accountants, etc.

However, if we continue our trend of dis-investment in higher education, these positions will not be filled. These services will not be available. Companies that might want to do business in western Oklahoma might look elsewhere. It is something to think about today.

Besides having the honor of being president of SWOSU, I also run a private business. I know that if I do not invest in that business, it will fail to produce the results that are needed to keep it vibrant. This is the same with public education.

Napoleon Hill, an American author, once said, "There is no such thing as something for nothing." That quote is simple and true. If we want good things for our communities, our children and our neighbors, we must invest in them.

I would ask that you support our elected officials who feel the same.

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