

We need liberal education

The recent editorial “Students must weigh their educational goals” (March 30) suggested a false choice to high school students who are about to graduate, and their parents. It was that university students who do not major in a professional field are merely broadening their intellectual horizons and are accomplishing little of future economic value.

This view echoes comments made by President Barack Obama in his State of the Union speech in January, which emphasized only our economy’s need for science and technology. We are faced with “A Sputnik moment,” he said, but today the challenge on many fronts across the world is from China, not the Soviet Union.

Don’t get me wrong: We need scientists and other professionals and we need more manufacturing, not less. But let us remember that the immediate economic challenges we face today are not the result of a lag in science and engineering education, nor caused by a lack of nurses or teachers. The economic collapse had nothing to do with that. Instead, perhaps if more executives had taken an ethics, a political science course, or a history course, or some



KEITH
MONTGOMERY

sociology, then they might have made some different decisions had they first seen themselves as citizens with responsibilities to a larger society and evaluated their decisions within a larger context.

The collapse of Enron, like the recent collapse of banks and finance houses which its collapse in some ways foreshadowed, was not the result of a lack of accountants in the economy.

Study after study shows that liberal arts majors and professionals with degrees built upon general education liberal arts are innovators and leaders across all fields. And surveys of employers, both locally and nationally, tell us that employers value greatly the learning outcomes developed through a liberal (a “free”) education as much as in-depth skills in a specific field. These outcomes include the ability to grasp the larger context of situations and decisions, the ability to communicate effectively, and the ability to critically evaluate and reason. These are now recognized as not just intellectual but also highly practi-

cal skills. In fact, the majority of major employers believe that these intellectual skills are required for advancement or promotion. Narrow training — the kind offered in many degree and certificate programs — is ultimately limiting for both the employee and the employer.

We do not need a narrower field of graduates — we need to be smarter than that. We need to see liberal education and the humanities as a competitive advantage in the world. Our economy today requires innovation, flexibility and global savvy as much as it needs math and science.

The UW System is nationally recognized as a leader in recognizing that helping communities grow and enhancing the role of the humanities and liberal arts in education is not an “either/or” choice. As UW System President Kevin Reilly stated, “The UW Growth Agenda calls for higher education to act as a catalyst for educational, social, civic, and economic transformation.” Locally, you can find that kind of transformative education at University of Wisconsin Marathon County.

Keith Montgomery is the campus executive officer/dean at the University of Wisconsin Marathon County.