

The Day

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An Optimistic America Supports Higher Education

By Leo I. Higdon Jr.

My faith in the optimism that so distinctly characterizes the American public was upheld recently when I saw nearly 5,000 residents of Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts put their own cares aside to help build a home for a family that has been through unspeakable tragedy.

ABC's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" came to town and spearheaded a revolution of donations and volunteerism unlike anything I have seen in a local community. Whatever your opinion of the show, what resonated most for me was the sheer volume of people - including many students and staff from Connecticut College - who put their lives on hold for a week or more to bring this family some joy.

The experience has renewed my own faith in a philanthropic society that rallies around its own. Recently, a colleague asked me if I believe philanthropy has a place in the current economic climate. The answer, in any economy, is a resounding yes. And when she followed up by asking if I was worried that colleges and universities would be left out in the cold during this recession, I remarked very simply that they can't be.

Education is the open door to the future of our world. It is critical to our country's success in the global economy. As Americans, we all share in the considerable responsibility of ensuring that we usher our young people through that open door. In difficult economic times, it is more important than ever to support education - at every level and in every way we can.

At Connecticut College, that support is defined most clearly through financial aid. Our commitment is to make college accessible to a broad and diverse range of students by meeting their demonstrated need. It's a big commitment that will continue to challenge us and colleges across the country as we navigate through the recession, and it is one to which we will adhere with the support of our own community.

We will meet that challenge with the help of our alumni, parents and friends. We know people are struggling. And that's a big part of why it's so important that higher education philanthropy continue to be top of mind for those who can afford to give. At our college, and virtually all public and private colleges, no student pays the full cost of education. Students are subsidized by people who give to the college.

Here in Connecticut, community colleges and state universities have already cut budgets, and anticipate another 10 percent in cuts when the state budget is announced later this month. The natural emotional tie many graduates have for their own colleges and universities is due, in part to the financial support they received as students. Now, hopefully, those graduates will continue to support their own institutions so they can help make the same education possible for the next generation.

According to the Giving USA Foundation's report, "Giving During Recessions and Economic Slowdowns," total giving in the United States has risen every year, except one, since 1969. The one year philanthropy failed to increase was in 1987, when tax changes impacted Americans' giving habits. This bodes well for all institutions of higher education - they need the public's support now more than ever.

I am confident that higher education's mission will continue to garner financial support. Troubled times only heighten the value and importance of this education, for the success of individual students and for society as a whole.

Americans are, on balance, a very optimistic people. That's in part because we now have generations of people who have solved tremendous problems or overcome great difficulties. They've been able to do so with the support of their friends and neighbors and because they have benefited from the best higher education system in the world. And we want to keep it that way.

Our new president, Barack Obama, continues to project a sense of hope that is pervasive. I've seen it myself in this local community, and I've seen it in the broader context of the Connecticut College community. And, when people all over the country tune in Feb. 8 to watch the "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" that was made here in eastern Connecticut, they will see as I have all that can be accomplished when we support our friends and neighbors.

A graduate of Georgetown University with a degree in History, Leo I. Higdon has an MBA from the University Of Chicago. He served in the Peace Corps and then spent 20 years with Salomon Brothers before becoming Dean Of The University Of Virginia's Darden Graduate School Of Business Administration. Subsequently, he was president of Babson College and the College Of Charleston.