

VALLEY VOICES

# It's tough to select college best for you

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RICHARD REEB

October 27's Press Dispatch featured a front-page article headlined "Bridging the gap" that highlighted the fact that a smaller percentage of Victor Valley and San Bernardino County adults age 25 and over from 2007 to 2011 earned a bachelor's degree or higher or even graduated high school (with the exception of Apple Valley residents) than others in California. Is this necessarily a bad thing? Well, yes and no.

The stark fact is that there is no four-year college in the High Desert, let alone the Victor Valley, so one of the incentives to seek a four-year college degree is missing. Indeed, in all the years I taught at Barstow Community College, I knew that only a small percentage of the students, even those who earned an associate's degree, transferred to campuses of the California State University or the University of California. So this recent alarming statistic hardly comes as a shock.

Victor Valley College, to its credit, with its K16 Bridge Program, is seeking to overcome these deficiencies by aiming higher than we did at BCC with our partnering program with Barstow and Silver Valley high schools by pointing students to the terminus of college studies, which is the BA. As the Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote, it is better to aim higher than the immediate target, just as the archer does as he takes aim with his bow, increasing his chances of reaching it.

The article does not, as its broad statistical focus indicated it might, deal with any issues beyond the local ones of students matriculating at VVC. But my career in higher education has shown me that students must think carefully about college, not only because it is an important and potentially life-changing experience, but because it is a lot more complicated than simply preparing yourself for college study and making plans to get into a college that suits your needs.

Once I realized that many colleges were becoming more and more expensive, and especially when I noticed that they had become indoctrination centers for what is now called Political Correctness (meaning the imposition of leftist dogma), I advised students to ignore all the glossy publications and the U.S. News rankings of what are supposedly the best institutions of higher education and find out who the professors are in your intended field of study and how dedicated they are to serious study.

Admittedly, these are not easy things to find out. It is, truth be told, inside information that we are talking about here. But when you consider the fact that tuition and other costs of college have mushroomed in recent decades, it pays, so to speak, to find out all you can about the people you will be spending so much of your time with for four or more years.

When I enrolled at San Jose State College in the spring of 1961, the fee for a full load of classes (15 units) was \$45.50. That remained the case until I finished course work on my master's degree in 1968. In the fall of that year I enrolled at Claremont Graduate School for what I considered the astronomical sum of \$750. Now, as most everyone knows, that figure is now chump change at any four-year school, as well as the community colleges outside of California.

Obviously, inflation has driven up the cost of higher education. Or has it? The truth is, the rise in tuition costs has exceeded the annual rate of inflation for quite a few years now. Why is that? It is hardly a mystery. As the costs have climbed, so have the student loan and grant programs. But instead of bringing costs down, these national and state subsidies have driven them up.

How so? If someone keeps giving me money in spite of the fact that my living costs have not risen, I will have no reason whatsoever to control my expenses; or as they say in business, to watch my bottom line. Indeed, the endowments of Harvard, Yale and Stanford are in the billions of dollars. Government money is enriching already wealthy schools and impoverishing their students.

One of my philosophy professors at Claremont was a fellow who commendably encouraged us seriously to look at all sides to all questions, sometimes uncomfortably so. But when it came to picking a college, he actually said, "Pick the cheapest." He knew that what he did was rare and did not see any reason why students should waste their money on schools where deep thinking was not part of the package.

Most students today enroll because they have a well-paying or respected career in mind, a worthy goal. But the question always is, is college the best place to pursue that goal? Students have every right to know whether that education will pay off, especially when they realize that millions of people who went before them graduated (assuming they did) with a degree that did not get them a good job, or even a foot in the door to one, and that left them tens of thousands of dollars (or more) in debt.

If you really love study, not only for its career advantages, but for its own sake, by all means go to college. But if it is merely a necessary means to a far more desirable end, consider trade school or a community college that provides occupational training. I speak as one who, after struggling in my undergraduate program, finally encountered some serious and challenging professors in graduate school who showed me that lifelong study, not as a mantra but as a way of life, was a good choice. But it is not for everybody.

In short, make sure that college is a worthwhile experience and not a disheartening or bankrupting one. Not everybody is a scholar but surely all scholars belong in college. Go where it is best for you.

Richard Reeb lives in Helendale.