

National Elixir
Time to Cure Our Ills

By Brian P. Cory

February 28, 2013

Our nation is under the weather.

What if there was a national elixir that we could take to strengthen our immune system?

I think there is. Or at least there could be. It has just been mostly untapped for too long. It's time to make it widely available over-the-counter.

If we take some of this *stuff*, kiss the sequestration symptoms goodbye. We will begin to put our fiscal house in order. When the medicine kicks in, the glaring skills gap of the rapidly changing job market will narrow. Education at every level will be transformed to provide relief from the nagging repackaging of old forms of education affixed with a label which reads, "New and Improved Formula." New jobs will be created. After the elixir hits our bloodstream, national security will be bolstered and America's competitiveness will soar.

"Yeah right," you say. You ask, "*What is this magical elixir?*"

Just keep reading. It is described at the end of this piece but first we need to set the stage.

Higher Education has had a difficult time adapting to and keeping up with the demands of the future world. The new report from McKinsey & Company, Education to Employment: Designing a System that Works, highlights the critical skills shortage. The report states: "Across the nine countries that are the focus of this report (Brazil, Germany, India, Mexico, Morocco, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), only 43 percent of employers surveyed agreed that they could find enough skilled entry-level workers." The report continues, "The McKinsey Global Institute estimates that by 2020 there will be a global shortfall of 85 million high- and middle-skilled workers. If young people who have worked hard to graduate from school and university cannot secure decent jobs and the sense of respect that comes from them, society will have to be prepared for outbreaks of anger or even violence."

North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory garnered attention during a radio interview when he stated that he instructed his staff to draft legislation that would base school funding for the state's public colleges and universities on post-graduate employment as opposed to enrollment. McCrory said, "It's not based on butts in seats but on how many of those butts can get jobs."

Current postsecondary graduates may have the credentials but they may not have the skills or the opportunities or the combination thereof to cash in on the return from their investment in education. But at least these students finished.

For many other students, finishing or graduating remains a major hurdle. As stated in the report, The American Dream 2.0, “Almost half of the students who enroll in an institution of higher learning do not graduate with any credential within six years.” The numbers only get worse for specific groups. The report states that, “Sixty-three percent of African-American students do not earn a credential within six years. For Hispanics, 58 percent won’t cross the finish line in that time.” The Center for American Progress published a report entitled, The Race That Really Matters: Comparing U.S., Chinese, and Indian Investments in the Next Generation Workforce, which noted that more than half of U.S. postsecondary students drop out without receiving a degree.

The nation’s collective student debt has ballooned beyond \$1 trillion. Yes, with a “t”. And you guessed correctly, it’s projected to get worse.

As reported on CNBC, Campus Consultants President Kal Chany and author of the book, “Paying for College Without Going Broke,” calculated what college will likely cost by 2030 based on inflation rates. The CNBC article stated, “The findings? In 18 years, the average sticker price for a private university could be as much as \$130,428 a year. The situation isn’t much better if you go the public route. Sending your child to a state university could set you back at least \$41,228 a year.”

Somehow, given all of this, the majority of us still believe the pathway to the American Dream is through our colleges and universities. However, given today’s day and age, I contest that Higher Education has become the Wal-Mart of postsecondary pursuits. When students consider their postsecondary options, their menu of choices is increasingly limited. For the record, I have nothing against Wal-Mart but competition is good. Higher Education needs a real competitor; a competitor that holds at least as much promise for high school graduates as does a degree earned from traditional colleges and universities.

In the 2013 State of the Union Address, President Obama said, “Right now, countries like Germany focus on graduating their high school students with the equivalent of a technical degree from one of our community colleges, so that they’re ready for a job. At schools like P-Tech in Brooklyn, a collaboration between New York Public Schools, the City University of New York, and IBM, students will graduate with a high school diploma and an associate degree in computers or engineering. We need to give every American student opportunities like this.”

This portion of President Obama’s speech created some buzz among educators, students, and education reformers and writers. The President’s thinking in this area is exciting. But we need to carry the momentum of such thinking and “go big” in considering postsecondary pathways for

our nation's high school graduates. It is time to develop a worthy competitor capable of prospering alongside Higher Education.

In these times, Higher Education cannot be the only main game in town.

It's time that we try a new medicine to cure our ills. Previous and current prescriptions clearly do not appear to be working effectively.

This brings us to the magical elixir. It is not the only possibility. In fact, I believe we need to experiment with and tap many possibilities. But imagine the following scene as one of the new postsecondary pathways for students:

A group of innovative industry leaders and CEOs decide to create entrepreneurial structures to cultivate their own feeder systems to develop and sustain their organizations' future. Within these structures, they design systems that employ apprenticeship and internship models to ensure the preparedness and quality of their potential workforce rather than relying on traditional institutions of higher learning.

Students accepted to these new learning systems are essentially awarded a four-year, tuition-free scholarship as the students do not pay a dime. The students apply their drive and passion to get the most out of the experience as well as to bring something to the experience in order to position themselves in the most advantageous position as potential future employees.

This national elixir offers an array of benefits while addressing our current symptoms. For example, students of these new learning structures do not accumulate a penny of debt and are ensured that they are equipped with the skills employers are looking for. In addition, as proven entities in a competitive pipeline, these students have a foot in the door of potential employers. They essentially market themselves for four years. When they successfully exit the learning system, students are awarded credentials which carry as much weight as a degree.

Industry leaders and CEOs also reap benefits from taking this elixir. They ensure that their organizations continue to grow and evolve while meeting the demands of the future, which include quality human capital. Since learning students are working simultaneously, existing employees are freed up and hence are able to be utilized in new ways. Every incoming "class," cultivates inspiring incubators of new excitement, perspectives, and ideas and ignites the explosion of Silicon Valley-like hubs of innovation.

If such a pathway was of the scale and scope of Higher Education and was available to all high school graduates, I am convinced that many of our nation's ills would be cured. The impact would trickle down to high schools who, in turn, would revamp their designs and offerings. High schools would no longer be judged primarily on how many of their students matriculated to colleges or universities. High schools would adopt programs to ensure their students are attractable to colleges and universities as well as to the hubs of innovation.

If you were an employer hiring a new employee today, who do you think you would hire? Would you hire a candidate who is a graduate with general training from a college or university or would you hire a candidate who you have personally nurtured over four years with mindful, targeted training?

If we could scale it and scope it, there is potential in this concoction.

And before you worry, rest assured that liberal arts education will still be in business for students who choose to pursue it. In these times, students need a variety of viable options. We have plenty of symptoms and needs to keep all the competitors in business.

Pass the elixir. It's time to get healthy and strong again.