

Higher ed needs to plan growth for the long term

EARL H. POTTER III, ST. CLOUD STATE UNIVERSITY March 21, 2015

A few weeks ago, when the temperature broke 50 degrees for the first time this year, I started to think about spring and what it brings — regrowth, renewal and the prospect of a fresh start.

Similarly, spring is upon colleges and universities throughout the country.

Now, more than ever, cost, value and outcomes — workforce training, qualified graduates, job placement potential — are leading the decision on whether to attend college. It's become a conversation on a national scale and in Congress. But being workforce-ready requires a broad set of skills and abilities for success. My colleagues understand this as well.

In her academic year opening "To a Higher Degree" column, Mary Dana Hinton, president of the College of St. Benedict, acknowledged the value of college is far beyond financial, and employers are seeking skills developed and refined in a liberal arts environment — public and private: critical thinking, complex problem-solving and strong written and oral communication skills, according to the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Joyce Helens, president of St. Cloud Technical & Community College, has written that "a direct track to employment includes a broad vision of the world, learning to think independently, making sound judgments and being able to clearly communicate with others."

Students and families understand this as well, and new freshmen applications for fall 2015 are up at St. Cloud State University.

Our state leaders know this too and understand that higher education is important to the individual and to our state's economy.

However, a changing economic landscape requires us to change with it.

Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) experienced rapid enrollment growth between 2005 and 2010. The record-setting growth was driven in large part by the economic recession and high levels of unemployment, which drove many young people and adult learners to our colleges and universities to upgrade their skills or learn a new profession.

During the past five years, we have experienced another rapid change. Minnesota's strong economy and improved employment outlook, along with declines in the number of high school graduates, have contributed to declining enrollment levels, which mirror national trends. The character of our student body is changing as well, with increases in part-time students, students of color and international students.

While we take pride in the high-quality education offered at St. Cloud State, we understand it's no longer business as usual and spring is in the air. We are growing and moving ahead to continue to be an asset in the state's forward movement and to meet the needs of our students and community.

As we look forward to the trees budding and the crops starting to grow, we are prepared and committed to developing our programs and look to our faculty, staff and students to offer creative ways to cut costs and identify opportunities for growth.

These efforts already have resulted in new graduate programs — professional science masters and the master of public administration — and expansion in our online education presence with the registered nurse to Bachelor of Science in nursing program that saw its first cohort this semester.

Collaborative agreements and partnerships also are key to positioning the university for the future of higher education. For years, we have partnered locally with SCTCC on the Community College Connection program, which helps students start their education at the community college to be better prepared to finish their four-year degree at St. Cloud State.

Internationally, a 2+2 agreement with Nankai University Binhai College in Tianjin, China will bring more than 100 students to St. Cloud State in 2016. Through the partnership, students from Binhai College will spend two years studying in Tianjin and two years studying at St. Cloud State to earn their degree through the bachelor of science in finance program.

Today's workforce demands interdisciplinary skills, which reflects the partnering work being done in our facilities such as the Integrated Science and Engineering Laboratory Facility. ISELF encourages collaboration, experiential learning and innovation. This is apparent by the more than 200 students, 30 faculty and 60 research students who regularly use the facility to gain experience and hands-on training. The industry-standard laboratory spaces, access to resources, knowledgeable faculty and staff and a strong pool of student talent has already created partnerships with 10 regional businesses.

There are many other recent successes and projects on the horizon, and I take pride in knowing that we have made great recent strides in preparing for the future. But there is more to be done and I am confident that St. Cloud State, our MnSCU partners and institutional neighbors are ready to put in the work to continue to make college a value to students and the community. There are short-term needs, but this spring in higher education, we need to plant our gardens with long-term growth in mind.

This is the opinion of St. Cloud State University President Earl H. Potter III. To A Higher Degree is published the fourth Sunday of the month and rotates among the presidents of the four largest Central Minnesota higher education institutions.