Tony Calabro, John Gwaltney, Ron Remington & Carol Lucey: Time to set colleges free

By TONY CALABRO, JOHN GWALTNEY, RON REMINGTON and CAROL LUCEY    July 8, 2015

The governor, legislature, Board of Regents, and Nevada System of Higher Education deserve to be commended for working to improve education in Nevada during the 2015 legislative session.

However, for months we have looked on with concern about our state’s economic future and that of our students. Simply, the recently revised funding formula, with a goal of rectifying inequities between the two universities, has created budgetary chaos for the state’s four community colleges.

In particular, one consequence of the new formula was to shortchange students attending Nevada’s most rural colleges. Great Basin College and Western Nevada College must soon absorb budget cuts in excess of 30 percent. The temporary “bridge” funding provided by the legislature in June will only ease the inevitable budget devastation by allowing time for faculty and staff to polish their resumes and seek employment elsewhere, while presidents agonize over which services and communities to abandon, which programs to dismantle, and which employees to fire.

In the larger view, both the current funding formula and college governance structure penalize more than half of Nevada’s college students. Yes, more than half of all students in higher education in Nevada attend College of Southern Nevada, Great Basin College, Truckee Meadows Community College, and Western Nevada College.

While seductive to imagine college students having unlimited leisure time for strolling campus, pledging fraternities, attending football games, in reality many Nevada students work, support families, and are first generation college students.

This is particularly true of community college students. For many of these students, education is a ladder out of poverty. A bad college budget removes rungs from that ladder. These students have the same desire for an education that can improve their lives as do those who attend universities. Our leaders expect them to graduate and become the backbone of a new state workforce, thereby changing our economy and culture for the better. To regard community college students as lesser is wrong.

The work of community colleges is not glamorous, but the return on the taxpayer’s investment is profound. These are open door institutions with a focus on learning.
Faculty members are paid less to teach more (often for the same classes offered at universities). Their colleges don’t have post-graduate degree programs, boosters, strong alumni support, or wealthy donors who can supplement institutional revenue. Community colleges, without frills, just efficiently and effectively go about training and educating Nevada students. To regard community college faculty and the colleges themselves as lesser is wrong.

The governance of the System (Board of Regents) and the chancellor’s office are consumed by the business of our universities. The universities are complex institutions — their issues and concerns require full attention, and deserve no less.

The Board of Regents, however, has not proven to be an effective governance board for the community colleges, nor has the System office been an effective advocate for community college students. Despite regular attempts to improve the effectiveness of the system within the current governance model, major weaknesses persist. These should be seen as structural and not the fault of any given board, which has generally been composed of diligent and sincere citizens who have tried to do their best.

The chancellor’s office, recognizing the dilemma, recently proposed the hiring of a Vice Chancellor for Community Colleges. This “new idea” is not new at all. It has been implemented at least three times before, and each time has been unsuccessful.

The result inevitably was too much authority devolving to a centralized system bureaucracy, isolating the chancellor and the regents from issues and concerns of individual campuses. These individuals may well have advocated for community colleges, but on each occasion, the person occupying this highly paid position and the position itself disappeared.

Time and again, independent consultants have recommended changes for Nevada community college governance. Time and again, those recommendations have been ignored. Time and again, independent consultants have warned against the meager funding allotted to community colleges. Time and again, those admonitions have been ignored. An addiction to the status quo doesn’t allow for change, innovation, and improvement. Why does the state preserve a governance model that, in effect, inhibits the contributions of its community colleges and, most importantly, penalizes more than half of Nevada’s college students?

It’s time to admit the current college governance structure has hurt Nevada and its students. The state must find a better way forward and free the community colleges from a university-focused System.

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Kazmierski: Despite growing need, community colleges still get no respect

By MIKE KAZMIERSKI

We are at the cusp of historic growth in our region, due in part to Tesla’s announcement, but even more so as a result of the more than 100 new companies that have relocated to the region over the past few years. Add to this the scores of additional companies (advanced manufacturing, data centers, logistics and technology) we are working with; many that have already decided to come here, as well as the numerous local companies that are expanding. The projections are staggering! More than 50,000 new jobs are expected to be added to this region in the next five years. However, if we are going to meet this looming workforce development challenge, we must upgrade our existing workforce talent and our community colleges are the only way to address this surging demand. Yet we seem to have forgotten them, underfunded them, and generally underappreciated them. They have become the Rodney Dangerfield of our higher education system.

Our community colleges could be saying “I get no respect” like Rodney Dangerfield did. Although to be accurate, there is only one community college left in the state, Truckee Meadows Community College; the rest have changed their names to eliminate “community”. They are all “colleges” trying desperately to compete on the same level as our universities by adding four-year degree programs. This name change is their attempt to fight for funding and respect in a system of higher education that is exclusively run by university graduates. Yes, even the leadership in our community colleges have undergraduate, masters and doctorate degrees.

Earlier this summer, TMCC production technology instructor Randal Waldon shows off an industrial control panel like those a Tesla battery factory might use. (Photo: Andy Barron/RGJ file)
With our overwhelming belief that a college degree is the key to success, we fail to acknowledge that 74 percent of our Nevada kids will never get a four-year degree. So while we focus on the 26 percent, talk about being college-ready, and fund the path to success for that 26 percent, we leave behind, or generally label as unsuccessful, the other 74 percent - the vast majority of our youth.

What we value is what we fund. We recently passed legislation to increase funding for K-12 education and have increased funding to our universities, both overdue and critical to our economic diversification efforts. But why has the community college funding in Northern Nevada plummeted (down 25 percent in the past six years) at a time when the demand for this workforce-related technical skill training has skyrocketed? Those 100 new companies mentioned above need skilled employees, not four-year degree liberal arts majors. Eighty percent of the new jobs in the region require employees with technical skills or certifications, not a four-year degree. By the way, those advanced manufacturing jobs (half of our new companies) pay more than $60,000 a year and those jobs are available right now, here in Reno-Sparks.

In the long term, workforce development rests in large part with our K-12 education system. Increasing the high school graduation rate and adding an emphasis on STEM (or STEAM, if you add the arts) is imperative. However, a two-year degree or a certification is also needed if the next generation wants access to the quality jobs that are coming to the state.

Our community has worked very hard to attract quality companies to the region with a focus on advanced manufacturing and technology. The addition of Tesla and almost 50 other manufacturing companies has moved us a long way toward becoming the "advanced manufacturing hub of the West". In addition to manufacturing, we are a developing technology center (with data center additions like Apple and Switch) and are reinforcing our place as the Western regional logistics hub. To continue this success we must now focus on the development of our workforce.

This growing demand for skilled labor compels us to value our community colleges and the path they pave to great jobs and incredible opportunity. We must ensure that our community colleges are adequately funded to truly “develop” the workforce of the future. We also need to value the jobs that are growing in our region, acknowledge that most can be filled with community college training, and prepare and even encourage our kids to take advantage of these great job opportunities right here in our state. It is unprecedented in our history to have so many quality jobs waiting for graduates with the necessary skills. This exciting growth will only continue if we enable our community colleges to meet the needs of our current and future employers.

Mike Kazmierski is president and CEO of the Economic Development Authority of Western Nevada.
Op-ed: Community colleges getting second-tier status

By JILL DERBY

As one who spent 18 years on the Nevada Board of Regents (three terms as board chair), and in the 1990s chaired a board task force reviewing the status and issues of Nevada’s community colleges, I have been distressed to witness both the budgetary formula that has badly hurt our community colleges in comparison to our two universities, and the regent’s latest proposals regarding the governance of the colleges that will only further diminish their standing in Nevada’s System of Higher Education.

Let’s be clear. Nevada’s community colleges educate half of Nevada’s college students. Let’s be even clearer. These students are often less economically advantaged than those who can afford the higher costs of a university education. Many work full-time in order to pay their tuition. Clearest of all, the growing inequality gap in the U.S. is the most compelling issue of our time and one that will frequent the headlines in the coming national election. Opportunity to move into the middle class is closely linked to a college education. Given those facts, that Nevada’s Board of Regents chooses to further diminish support for the community colleges is deplorable.

The new funding formula that the board has adopted clearly favors the universities over the community colleges. I understand that state funds are limited, and speak comparatively. As important as it was to rebalance the geographical distribution of higher education funding to address the south’s long-protested lesser share, doing it on the backs of Nevada’s community colleges has hurt those very students who have less available options, and are more economically challenged. The list of programs having to be cut at the colleges, and the students who will suffer as a result, is painful to watch.

Hiring a vice chancellor for community colleges is something that has been tried before, once during my tenure, at my recommendation, and was a complete failure. All it did and does is remove community college business from the desk of the chancellor who is the CEO of the system, to a place of less influence and authority. Relegating the critical programs and concerns of the community colleges to both a sub-unit of the board and to a vice chancellor is clear evidence of the secondary status the Nevada’s Board of Regents attributes to Nevada’s community colleges. The impacts these actions would have on student lives and prospects is deeply distressing. Most members of the Board of Regents are university graduates. I hope that doesn’t limit their understanding and appreciation of the outstanding job our community colleges do in opening lanes of opportunity to students who would not otherwise have them. This is our Nevada’s and America’s biggest challenge.

Jill Derby is the former chair of the Nevada Board of Regents.