

**To a Higher Degree Commentary
For St. Cloud Times July 22, 2012
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Considerable discussion about the value of a college education has been swirling around the country lately, fueled by a variety of factors involving the job market and mounting anxiety about student debt.

I can assure you that most of us involved in higher education are listening – and responding. The broad reorganization process St. Cloud State University has undergone in the past few years has been the result of resolve to offer all our students an education that is cost effective, practical and relevant, yet life-altering and profound.

You may have noticed a new tagline on St. Cloud State billboards and other printed materials this past year – “Education for Life.” The words are a declaration that faculty and staff are committed to a partnership with students to provide the opportunities and experiences that can lead to personal and professional success throughout a lifetime.

An education for life is more than a series of classes that provide a set of skills and knowledge for the workplace. It takes people with well-developed character, work ethic and sensitivity to those around them to bring those skills and that knowledge to life in the communities where they will live and work.

It’s an education that exposes students to a broad range of points of view, perspectives, cultures and traditions that may challenge those of their families and friends. Many of our students come to our diverse campus community and encounter different ideas about people, places and politics. It is our hope that students will listen to all these viewpoints, apply critical thinking and form their own ideas.

Education for life also involves building the partnerships beyond campus that will enable individual students to have deep and rich experiences that show them how to apply their learning to the real world. A graduate is likely to have a decades-long career that will require the flexibility, the critical thinking skills and the creativity that enable them to evolve as their careers change.

Students at St. Cloud State are rolling up their sleeves for service learning projects that help the community, internships and volunteer jobs that prepare them for the work world and bring them face-to-face with the needs of people and places in their community. They are interacting with mentors and new friends who will enrich their lives and inspire them to be tougher, more nimble and more understanding.

Education for life is about responding to the changing needs of our students and the changing needs of the businesses and institutions where they will work in the future.

The leadership of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system is leading the way in this endeavor.

“By listening to Minnesota employers, we can obtain a greater, much more precise understanding of the state’s workforce needs,” said MnSCU Chancellor Steven Rosenstone. “Armed with this data, we can ensure that higher education is delivering the right academic programs and preparing graduates with the skills necessary for the success of Minnesota’s businesses and communities.”

St. Cloud State has responded to the needs of the state’s business community with programs tailored to providing them with the educated workforce they will need to succeed. A great example is the growth of the St. Cloud State nursing program that has grown up in the last decade to help mitigate a nursing shortage in the state.

This fall the university will launch its third master’s degree program in response to the needs of the state’s burgeoning medical technology industry.

The new master of science degree in medical technology quality is uniquely focused on medical products, and like the others will be taught at St. Cloud State’s Twin Cities Graduate Center in Maple Grove. Professionals in this industry develop and implement systems for ensuring product quality from concept and design to manufacturing and full commercialization.

A college education – an education for life – is still a good value, even with average tuition costs at public four-year universities that are somewhat higher than St. Cloud State’s \$6,846 per year (private four-year not-for-profit colleges average \$21,949 per year and four-year private for-profit schools average \$15,056 per year).

According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, a typical graduate with a bachelor’s degree earns about 66 percent more in a 40-year career than a person with only a high school diploma. And employers continue to need educated workers.

It is our goal to ensure that a St. Cloud State degree is worthy of the investment of time and funds it requires.