Question:

Is the purpose of college to make students employable?

Yes, as college instructors, our mission is to increase our students’ life opportunities.

Karen Baehler

No, higher education must have more of a purpose than making students employable.

Daniel Rieser

Perhaps this question is subject to a variety of interpretations. But I interpret this question to be: Is the primary function of higher education to prepare higher education students for the workforce?

Granting this interpretation and acknowledging higher education’s instrumental worth—as preparation both for work and for leisure—I will argue that the answer to the question at hand is “no.”

Making workforce preparation the primary mission of higher education perpetuates a persistent attitude among a significant percentage of students and many policy makers that higher education has value because it can prepare students for the workforce. This attitude seems particularly evident during times of job shortages, and reflects a view of life that reduces higher education to a mere means to earning a living, if not to self-indulgent affluence and the pursuit of wealth, power, or mastery over others.

This is contrary to what I consider higher education’s primary vocation, namely, to educate the whole person. By nature, human persons possess capacities suited not just for work, but also for inquiry, discovery, reflection, understanding, integration, constructive criticism, and creative expression.

Since we possess these capacities for a lifetime, the primary purpose of higher education must be to provide a foundation for educating the whole person; it must be geared to develop as fully as possible the whole of a student’s human potential. Developing workforce skills does not necessarily entail fostering inquiry, reflection, understanding, integration, or creative expression. Consequently, higher education must have more of a purpose than simply making students employable.

Karen Baehler is an economics instructor at Hutchinson Community College in Hutchinson, Kansas, currently on sabbatical pursuing her Ph.D in education at the University of Kansas. She has spent 15 years serving as a middle and high school history teacher in Kansas.

Daniel Rieser, professor of philosophy and religion at Broward College (Florida), is an NEA Higher Education Emerging Leaders Academy graduate. He now serves as first vice-president of the United Faculty of Florida (UFF) and chief negotiator for the UFF chapter at Broward College.