

VIEWPOINT

The value of community colleges

The New York Times recently ran a piece by two columnists that provoked interest on a number of fronts, including the value of a two-year, community-college education.

For his part, Bret Stephens said this: "We also need to think about why we are burdening college students with mountainous debt in exchange for increasingly useless college degrees. B.A. now stands for Bankruptcy by Arts. The best thing that could happen educationally is an investment in community colleges that enhances their value, rigor and prestige."

Gail Collins responded: "I agree, let the Biden administration focus on how to make community colleges work, occasionally reminding Republicans that should have been one of their goals if the Trump years had actually been about upward mobility for the lower-middle class."

Since the North Country, and particularly Clinton County, is home to higher-education centers of learning, this is a topic that deserves some thought and discussion.

Is a bachelor of arts degree becoming less useful? Is it a necessity with no proven worth, except to say you have one?

Does a typical first year in a liberal arts program make a student more employable, in a practical sense? Subjects such as English, history, a science, a math, psychology and sociology, for example, unquestionably make a person more well rounded, but do they qualify the person for a specific career?

In some cases, of course, students in their freshman year haven't yet settled on a career choice, and the varied courses help aim them in a suitable direction.

Meanwhile, community colleges, often overlooked by the more accomplished high-school students, are getting immediately down to business in getting students ready for the work world.

And aren't community colleges more responsive to community needs? Think of when particular industries were talking about settling in the North Country. Clinton Community College immediately set about establishing education programs that would supply workers for those industries.

It gave the community new ammunition in fighting to attract various kinds of industries and businesses to the North Country.

When the embryonic company Laurentian was going to come in and set up almost futuristic repair stations for commercial jets, Clinton began thinking of programs that would prepare prospective employees for the high-paying jobs that were possibly going to be, not only available, but crucial to contributing to the North Country economy in so many ways.

As it happened, the prospects for that industry fell through, as investment money dried up and prevented the dreamy possibilities from ever becoming a reality.

We're not arguing against the value of a bachelor's, master's or doctoral degree. But we do encourage high schoolers to fully consider whether an associate's degree, in their case, would be just as valuable or even more so.

And, meanwhile, CCC, North Country Community College and other two-year colleges continue to look around and examine how they could expand the economic and employment outlook for the region.

They are at least as important to the community as a four-year school.