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Restore high ideals to learning

College students should study real estate less and our founding principles more.

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A college freshman sitting next to me during a recent train ride proudly told me he was majoring in finance and real estate. I was far too polite to say what I really thought.

I cannot help but think that, while conventional wisdom might hold that we need students thinking about careers for the good of the economy, our country really needs students thinking about big ideas.

The combination of economic collapse and coming inauguration of our nation's first black president ought to provide a starting point for richer reflection on who and what we are as a people, and on higher education's role in our future.

At first blush, it may seem to make sense in the current crisis to produce even more graduates prepared to pursue careers on Wall Street. But how do we foster a sense of proportion, an understanding of the context we all live in, and our mutual obligations, which stretch beyond our careers?

We educators have put too much emphasis on how to work the system. It is time for us to reconsider what we teach. It is time for us to restore, to the center of undergraduate education, teaching about our shared values and highest ideals.

As we rode the train, I pondered the irony that these difficult times seem to dictate more career orientation for students like my seatmate. But students should be studying real estate less and our founding principles more.

Given all the invocations of Abraham Lincoln lately, including the coming historic train ride from Philadelphia to the inauguration, we must recognize that Lincoln's legacy is not only about

the injustice of slavery. He also railed against royalty, hierarchies, and the dominion of rich over poor and the well-born over the unprivileged.

He did so because he saw the moral deficiency of any scheme of political organization that did not begin with "the proposition that all men are created equal." If that proposition had loomed larger in the education of many of our business leaders, we would be in a different place.

As we pulled into the station in Philadelphia, I could not help but recall what an earlier train passenger had observed in the same city. In 1861, on his way to Washington, Lincoln said that there was "something in the Declaration [of Independence] giving liberty not alone to this people, but hope to the world for all future time."

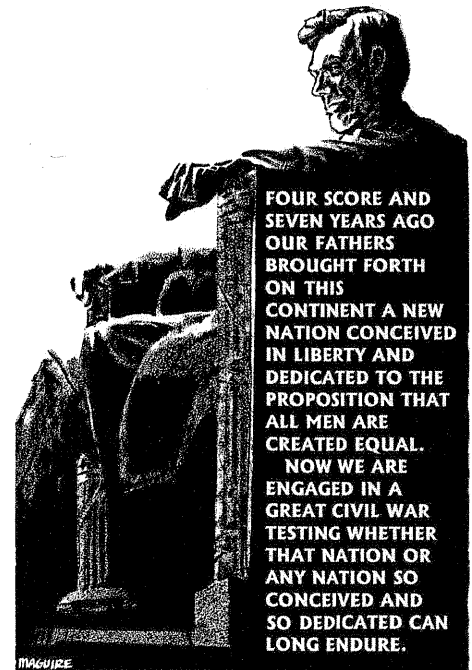
What unites us is the American ideal that our Union is derived from the consent of the governed and that the consent of each is of equal value.

That we have a system based on that moral proposition should not go unchallenged. Education, after all, entails questioning even of the plainest propositions, and it should include consideration of our failures. But we need to put the proposition to which we are dedicated more clearly at the center of undergraduate studies.

I can only hope my fellow passenger will learn in his college courses what Lincoln and all our best leaders have understood: that to create a government based on the idea of the essential dignity and equality of every human being was a radical break from all that had gone before.

There is no better time than now for higher education to step back and engage these ideals in shaping the education our students receive.

Fortunately, we who shape college curriculums are not starting from



scratch. A growing number of colleges and universities, including my own, are moving away from feeding students' careerist concerns and instead engaging them in conversations about values.

Other institutions also are fueling this conversation, including the planned American Revolution Center at Valley Forge and, in Philadelphia, both the Jack Miller Center for Teaching America's Founding Principles and History and the National Constitution Center.

At the beginning of the Lincoln bicentennial and the Obama administration, rather than appealing to students' hopes to get rich, colleges have a chance to rekindle a new idealism. We must resolve to restore fundamental questions about the nature of our society to the center of education. As Lincoln said, "We — even we here — bear the power and the responsibility."