Education has long been regarded as a “recession-proof” industry. In bad economic times workers improve their skills by completing their college degree or earning another. But the nation’s persistently high unemployment rate has some influential people questioning the effectiveness of the American system of higher education – and wondering whether a college degree is worth the effort.

In a provocative May 14 New York Times article, several economists – including professors from highly regarded universities – argued that a four-year degree is a waste of time and money for thousands of students. Many fast-growing jobs don’t require a college diploma, so vocational training is enough for many young people, these experts say.

The fact remains that workers with a bachelor’s degree earn approximately 70 percent more per year than their counterparts without a college degree, and the unemployment rate among college graduates is 4.7 percent, about half the jobless rate for the nation as a whole. What’s more, by 2018, the economy will have 22 million new jobs requiring a college degree, but face a shortfall of up to 7 million qualified employees to fill them, according to the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

That doesn’t let Robert Morris University and our peers off the hook. The jobs may be there, but we have an obligation to ensure our students have the skills not only to fill those jobs but to flourish in them. I’m confident making that statement because I know RMU does just that; what we do could be a model for others.

We have a 92 percent job placement rate – that’s how many students have a job or are enrolled in graduate school within six months of graduation. It doesn’t happen by accident. We apply the liberal arts to professionally focused degree programs, with curriculum designed to match the skills and knowledge students will need for their chosen career.

Course work stays current thanks to our faculty, who have industry experience and who conduct research that complements their teaching, engaged advisory boards with experts from the field, and professional accreditations that require renewal. In this President’s Insider we tell you briefly about two of those programs, actuarial science and sport management.

But that’s not enough. A recent report by the Association of American Colleges and Universities noted that employers need workers whose skills are broader than field-specific knowledge. They need good skills in communication, intercultural competence, teamwork, and ethical decision-making, to name a few.

We give our students those skills. You’ll read on the following pages about our award-winning Communication Skills Program and our Student Engagement Transcript. The latter has formalized our brand of engaged learning, and helps students document how their RMU education has changed their lives and helped them to change the lives of others.

Want further proof of our success? This fall we will welcome a freshman class of at least 900 students, exceeding last fall’s record freshman enrollment of 720. What we do works, and more and more people are taking notice.

Sincerely,

Gregory G. Dell’Omo, Ph.D.
Believing strongly in the importance of experiential learning – what we call engaged learning – RMU became nationally recognized with the introduction of its Student Engagement Transcript, which formally documents students’ participation in such areas as leadership activities, community service, study abroad, athletics, and work experience.

“Experiential learning is important because it helps students to bridge the gap between theory and practice,” says Shari Payne, RMU’s first dean of engaged learning. Shari administers the Student Engagement Transcript and coordinates many of the activities that fall under its purview.

“Theories and concepts become so much clearer when students can roll up their sleeves and put their knowledge to work. Research has demonstrated that students actively engaged in the learning process graduate at a higher rate. It breeds success,” Shari says.

Payne’s assertion is supported by a recent report from the National Survey of Student Engagement, which provides comparative data on student experiences at four-year institutions. According to the survey, engagement techniques are on the rise in college classrooms. This suggests that engaged students perform well.

What makes the RMU program unique is the transcript, which documents student activities. The SET tracks and certifies a student’s participation in faculty-sponsored extracurricular and co-curricular activities. These must fall in one of seven areas:

- Arts, culture and creativity
- Transcultural/global experiences, which include study abroad; research
- Community service
- Leadership
- Professional experience
- Independent study projects

RMU rolled out the Student Engagement Transcript in 2008 as a voluntary program. Last fall, the incoming class was required to participate, and students must demonstrate participation in at least two of the seven categories to graduate. The program has piqued the interest of universities around the country, and Shari has received numerous calls asking for information on how the program was implemented, why the categories were chosen, and the results to date. The SET complements our students’ resumes and academic transcripts when they seek a job or admission to graduate school.

“These are not just student activities,” she says. “All seven categories draw from the curriculum, so students are out there doing what they learn in class. Everything is supervised by RMU faculty or staff. The faculty plays a key role, which is critical to the program’s success. Students tell me their service learning courses are more work than their other courses, but they’re also a lot more rewarding.”

Michael Church, who graduated in May with a bachelor’s degree in business administration, agrees. Michael now works for Corazon Inc., a health consulting company.

“Getting engaged at RMU has given me leadership experiences, team-building experiences and public speaking confidence,” Michael says. “Not to mention the practical job experiences I have on my SET. … The SET is just a great way for me to show employers what I’ve done in college.”
Dave Tyburski doesn’t have to scratch his head when you ask him to name the best part of his RMU education “The biggest return on my investment was my communications classes,” says Dave, who graduated in 2003 with a bachelor’s degree in information systems.

Now, as an employer, Dave has learned that the ability to communicate effectively is one of the attributes that sets our students apart from their peers. A senior enterprise account executive with the Carnegie-based IT solutions firm LANtek, Dave has hired RMU grads and helps prepare RMU students for job interviews as a volunteer service to our career center.

“One thing that has always impressed me is that RMU students don’t need that much coaching,” Dave says.

The university launched its Communication Skills Program in 1995. It was a response to the growing frustration of employers nationwide that students were graduating from college without the ability to communicate effectively in the workplace. Typically, colleges and universities might require students to take a couple of composition courses and a speech course, with little thought to integrating those classes into a student’s professional training.

RMU took a different tack. All students were required to take five general communication courses, covering writing, public speaking, persuasion, intercultural communication, and professional communication. In addition, all students had to take four communication courses specific to their major. The program has been modified over the years, but the core remains largely intact and most students still take major-specific communication courses.

We like to call it applied liberal arts. A.J. Grant, the head of our Department of English Studies and Communication Skills, says that in creating the program, RMU took a page from the ancient Roman orator Cicero and his later admirer, Quintilian, whose philosophy influenced liberal arts education for centuries.

A.J. notes that RMU tracks students’ writing, speaking, and reading comprehension abilities as they move from course to course. Our students compare favorably with their peers nationwide on the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a highly regarded standardized test of writing, critical thinking, research, and persuasion skills.

“I’m proud of this program, and people who have graduated from it do reflect on the success they’ve had as a result,” A.J. says.

In an alumni survey RMU conducted last year, 70 percent strongly agreed that the university is well known for teaching communication skills that are valued by employers. Dale McLeod, an associate manager with Travelers Insurance, says he and his fellow managers have taken note of the poise that our graduates demonstrate on the job.

In the insurance industry, communications couldn’t be more important, Dale says.

“Our employees need to communicate with people who assume they are out to get them, resolve their concerns, and make customers happy. Day in and day out communications require conscious skill,” he says.
Provost David Jamison likes to say that Robert Morris University doesn’t have any “soft” majors. Each of our degree programs is designed so that students can launch their careers the minute they graduate. And we only start new programs if they meet an emerging workforce demand.

Take our program in actuarial science, which recently was named a Center of Actuarial Excellence by the Society of Actuaries. Ours is one of just 12 in North America to have earned that distinction, and RMU’s program is relatively young, dating back only to 2001.

Actuaries are experts on risk. Most work in the insurance industry, where they design health and retirement benefit plans by determining premiums and profit margins, and making recommendations based upon their calculations. Many also work for human resource consulting firms. Since most companies deal with some kind of risk, the job opportunities for actuaries in all industries—particularly health care—is steadily growing.

The starting salary for an actuary is approximately $50,000, and it has been named the best job in the nation by both Jobs Rated Almanac and The Wall Street Journal.

“Some schools focus on just the mathematics behind actuarial science,” says Katie Dobbs, a 2002 graduate who works for Cherion Inc. in Chicago. “But the actuarial profession is also built on business and communication skills, which RMU supports as well.”

Business principles also are an important distinction for RMU’s sport management program, which celebrates its 35th anniversary this fall. Sport management often is found in schools of education, or health sciences or related disciplines. But the nation’s elite sport management programs are housed in business schools, and RMU is no exception.

“If students come out of a sport management program that is within a business school, I think they are so much better prepared,” says University Trustee Vic Gregovits, senior vice president of sales and marketing for the Cleveland Indians and a 1986 RMU sport management graduate.

Professional sports are big business but the profession is a relatively small fraternity, which makes RMU’s vibrant alumni network and advisory board so crucial to helping students secure internships and land a job. Each year the program hosts a conference for students, where they can learn the ins and outs of the field from veterans like Vic and make valuable contacts.

“We want to build networking and relationships, and foster a culture of professional development,” says Dave Synowka, director of the sport management program.

Synowka has been a professor in the program nearly since the beginning. This year, he will join Vic and other distinguished graduates and supporters of the program in the RMU Sport Management Hall of Fame. The induction ceremony will take place at the sport management conference Oct. 15, and the following evening Dave will be the guest of honor at a roast to celebrate the 35th anniversary.

“Dave has been the rock,” says Vic. “He nurtures the program as it continues to grow.”