

Good News from DWU

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The news of late from Dakota Wesleyan University is very good. We just enrolled one of our largest classes in the midst of the most successful fund raising campaign and building expansion in our history. But as we know in South Dakota, the beautiful sun today may give way to a fierce storm tomorrow.

As Wesleyan celebrates homecoming this weekend, except to returning alumni, donors, and United Methodists, does it matter whether the news is good or bad at DWU? This same question could be asked about South Dakota State University in Brookings and The University of South Dakota in Vermillion. What good does Wesleyan, SDSU and USD do for their communities and South Dakota? The answer to that basic question stretches back to the founding of these institutions and surprisingly to a recent speech by Bill Gates, founder and former CEO of Microsoft.

In the case of DWU, Methodists of the Dakota Territory and business leaders in Mitchell led the way to start a university in Mitchell. These business and church leaders in the 1880s knew that a college would bring an economic bonanza and spur additional business. Business leaders in Vermillion and Brookings had the same economic aspirations for their university too.

Bill Gates' recent speech sounds much like those pioneer Methodists and business leaders from Mitchell, Vermillion and Brookings. Gates said to the National Conference of State Legislators that there is almost a "perfect correlation between the number of jobs in a region and the strength of the university." In other words, a university is a significant economic driver of regional economy.

The better a society develops its intellectual talent, the better able it will solve the legion of other human problems it faces. Where there is a strong and increasing supply of college-educated citizens, the economic future is bright. When educated, gifted and talented people leave a community to pursue a college education or cannot be attracted back, economic decline is inevitable. No wonder city leaders in Huron so courageously fought to save Si Tanka University.

Talented students and those who work for the university choose to live in the community. DWU, SDSU and USD are among the largest employers in their region. They are responsible for millions of dollars to their regional economy. But much more important than the economic benefit, the university produces social, intellectual and moral capital through the process of a college education. In the case of DWU, this benefit comes at no cost to Mitchell or South Dakota tax payers. And from my perspective, one of the best investments the state makes in itself is the tax dollars it allocates to SDSU and USD and the other state schools.

It should be no surprise to Mitchell residents, given the significant community involvement of DWU people, that college graduates are more likely to vote, volunteer their services and engage in community service than those who have not attended or graduated from college.

Since the time of the Dakota Territory, the city of Mitchell has been supportive of Wesleyan. And, the economic, social, and intellectual capital of the Mitchell region has been significantly enhanced by Dakota Wesleyan University.