DICK JONES
COMMUNICATIONS

OP/ED GUIDELINES

Op/ed articles should express an opinion. Editors say they receive too many articles that simply give the background of a problem without offering a solution. The author should express his or her viewpoint.

The argument must be supported with statistics, anecdotes, and results of studies or any other specific information available. It is not enough just to state a point of view. It must also be supported with logical argument. Op/ed articles unsupported by specifics are called "thumbsuckers" and are not highly regarded by newspaper editors.

The style should be informal, somewhat like a newspaper letter-to-the-editor. State your argument early and back it up. Don't wait until the end of the article to express your views.

Articles for newspapers should be 700 words in length or less. McClatchy-Tribune News Service now specifies 600 words. Some publications will accept lengthy op/eds but in general, the longer the article, the less chance of pickup.

Try not to be too academic. You can use the first person ("I think it's high time the Congress..."). You also can address the reader directly.

Be firm, but not fanatical. A wishy-washy article won't be used but one that comes on too strong may undermine your credibility as a spokesperson.

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(Most of these basic guidelines first were developed by Mary Dunkle, former manager of the news bureau at Penn State University).

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The Detroit News

Tuesday, April 7, 2009 Metro Edition

COMMENTARY

Liberal arts makes economic sense

BY DAVID J. KLOOSTER

This is the waiting season for high school seniors and their parents. Every trip to the mailbox comes with an edge of anxiety: Will the college acceptance or rejection come today? And if an acceptance, will the financial aid offer be generous enough to make the college dream possible?

At the small liberal arts college where I teach, the twist is that we are waiting to see if enough students will enroll. And at home, my youngest son is a high school senior.

There is still a strong case for attending a liberal arts college. I sometimes meet in my English Department office with prospective students and their parents. The student listens respectfully to my pitch about terrific faculty and interesting courses. Her mother beams, as she realizes that her child-rearing emphasis on reading with her daughter is about to be fulfilled: the girl is going to major in English. The father sits quietly, arms crossed, head down, thinking, "Thirty-five grand a year, and she's going to study poetry?" Only when I mention the strong internship program and the job market successes of our graduates does he look up and begin to be engaged.

I know that father's anxiety. Deep into this recession, it's a tough time for his daughter — or for my son — to decide that a liberal education is the best option. But it is the right investment.

If I had a few moments alone with that father, here's what I'd tell him.

We'll teach your daughter to write well. Even in this dismal economy, colleges continue to hear that strong writing skills are the most fundamental skills sought by employers. We know that your daughter already writes around the clock — on Facebook, on e-mail and in those hundreds of abbreviated text messages on her cell phone.

But these are Twittery, fragmentary messages. In her first-year composition course, we'll teach her to craft a strong argument, use contemporary research tools and extend her ideas from a couple of lines to many pages. We'll emphasize writing in her first year and stay after her until she graduates. Writing is crucial.

As she continues in her studies, we'll add novels that require her to develop skills in analysis and interpretation (abilities necessary in any business or organization), poems that require her to slow down and pay close attention (a fundamental life skill), and plays or films that ask her to understand how human beings relate to one another, how they are motivated, how they succeed or fail. She'll learn about people — and about herself.

We won't train her in a soon-to-be outmoded specialty. Instead, we'll provide her with the skills, knowledge and attitudes that will see her through any challenge. Your investment in her education, I'd like to tell this father, will be money well spent.

When the waiting season is over, these liberal arts students will be the ones who see new possibilities, who understand themselves and the world and who are most likely to help us overcome our woes.

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Science may be solid, but its image is not

•Scientists must not only talk among themselves; they must reach out to a skeptical public. Here's how.

By CHARLES NIEDERRITER

Recently Sen. John McCain repeated criticism made during the campaign by his running mate, Gov. Sarah Palin, about scientific research. Specifically, they knocked fruit fly research, which has a long and honored history in medical and scientific inquiry.

That these comments find a favorable market illustrates the need for scientists to communicate more effectively with the public about their work. The public's lack of trust of scientists has led to inadequate science education and to a continued erosion of the standing of American science.

Attendance at science museums continues to decline. The Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, for example, reported a 15 percent drop in attendance last year. And science teachers in many school districts continue to struggle for adequate support. Young people in nations such as Australia, China and New Zealand are often better prepared in mathematics and science when they enter college or university.

It is time for all scientists to change this situation by taking seriously the role of outreach and communication. It is no longer good enough to do good science and expect someone else to handle communication with the public.

There are a number of possible approaches to bringing science to the public, from science museums to lifelong learning programs such as Elderhostel or those of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes. One new idea being tested is the concept of science cafes, where the public can come for a taste of science in a nonthreatening environment. Science cafes are being held in coffee shops and other locations in many U.S. cities.

Colleges and universities should play a larger role. Most higher-education institutions hold conferences at which scientists speak to one another. But what if more colleges made concerted efforts to hold science conferences aimed not at scientists but at the general public? Would anyone come?

Yes, they would. The college I serve offers proof. For two days in early October each year, Gustavus Adolphus College plays host to the Nobel Conference. Although the science discussed by the speakers is cutting-edge, the Nobel Conference isn't just for scientists, but for the 5,000 or more high school and college students, interested adults, and lifelong learners who attend annually. Presentations by some of the world's foremost research scientists focus on scientific issues of theoretical importance and social significance.

The prominent scientists I have met through this conference and elsewhere are eager to share their expertise and findings with the public. America needs to maximize opportunities for them to do that. Scientists and educators can no longer afford to leave the framing and interpretation of scientific issues to others.

Charles Niederriter is a professor of physics and director of the Nobel Conference at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minn.