



# John Adams, professor emeritus of the University of Minnesota

Higher education institutions could strengthen state's human capital by refocusing on their missions

A Civic Caucus Focus on Human Capital Interview

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## Present

Tom Abeles, John Adams, Dave Broden (vice chair), Pat Davies, Paul Gilje (executive director), Dan Loritz (chair), Paul Ostrow, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter. By phone: Randy Johnson.

## Summary

University of Minnesota Emeritus Professor John Adams is concerned about the impact of careerism and poor leadership skills on efforts to improve postsecondary education's role in the formation of human capital in Minnesota. He says that through the 1950s and 1960s, most people working at the University of Minnesota (U of M) felt their job was a mission-directed vocation, one whose primary focus was on helping other people. According to Adams, now many people at the U of M, especially the younger faculty, worry more about tenure, raises and promotions and seem to feel that the University exists to give them a good job. And he believes middle managers in Minnesota's public colleges and universities are often ill-suited for the job and even further hindered by the rigidities of faculty union contracts at the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) system institutions.

He prescribes three action targets (and specific ways to reach them) to help improve the role of higher education in meeting Minnesota's workforce needs: (1) Enhance the active cooperation of school districts, high school counselors and vocational-technical colleges to widen the paths to job training for high school students who might not be four-year-college-bound; (2) Clarify the distinctive missions of each segment of MnSCU—community colleges, technical colleges and state universities—with the aim of reining in mission drift; and (3) Upgrade middle-management skills in Minnesota's colleges and universities.

Adams believes we must reexamine the merger of the technical colleges with the community colleges and four-year colleges into MnSCU. He says we've muted the value of the technical colleges by pulling them out of their local communities and putting them into the MnSCU system. We should, instead, try to figure out how to reconnect the technical colleges with their local school districts and the needs of the state's regional economies. And he suggests eliminating the barrier between grades 12 and 13 for students following the technical education route.

## Biography

John Adams is Professor Emeritus of Geography, Environment and Society in the College of Liberal Arts and of Planning and Public Affairs in the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, both at the University of Minnesota. He researches issues relating to North American cities, urban housing markets and housing policy, and regional economic development in the United States and the former Soviet Union. He has been a National Science Foundation research fellow at the Institute of Urban and Regional Development at the University of California at Berkeley and economic geographer in residence at the Bank of America world headquarters in San Francisco.

Adams was senior Fulbright lecturer at the Institute for Raumordnung at the Economic University in Vienna and was on the geography faculty of Moscow State University. He has taught at Pennsylvania State University, the University of Washington and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. His most recent book, *Minneapolis-St. Paul: People, Place, and Public Life*, looks at the region's growth and what factors might affect the metropolitan area's future. He is currently working on higher-education reform in Minnesota and is past president of the University of Minnesota Retirees Association.

Adams is a Minnesota native and grew up in Minneapolis. After receiving his B.A. in economics and mathematics from the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul and his M.A. in economics and statistics at the University of Minnesota, he completed his Ph.D. in economic geography at Minnesota.

## Background

Since the Civic Caucus released its [statement on human capital](#) in September 2014, it has concentrated on learning more about the challenges of maintaining a strong workforce in Minnesota in the coming years. The Civic Caucus interviewed John Adams to get his perspective on changes needed in postsecondary education in Minnesota to adequately prepare and train students for the state's current and future workforce.

## Discussion

**Over the years at the University of Minnesota (U of M), through the 1950s and 1960s, most people working there had the idea that their job was a vocation or mission and that they were helping other people.** "Now many people there have a very different approach to their jobs," said U of M Emeritus Professor John Adams. "Now at the University, people too often, especially the younger faculty, worry about tenure, raises and promotions. As a colleague imbued with a different idea about why we were there, this got more and more on my nerves. I've been annoyed by many self-centered attitudes I've encountered at the University."

**In an essay some years ago, a British commentator suggested that too many people in the U.K. and the U.S. have the "British disease," that is, a disdain for the doing of useful work.**

Adams said British tradition often held that high-class people owned land and collected rents, but they didn't work; other people did. That attitude began to permeate American culture and it undergirds the attitude here toward vocational-technical education, he said.

**From 1880 to 1990, the U.S. Census Bureau used a classification of occupations based on 10 categories, with the top five classified as "white collar" and the lower five classified as "blue collar."** Adams said this system grew out of a poll asking people which occupations they would want their children to have. This was used as the foundation for designing the hierarchy of occupations used in Census publications until 1990.

**How can we improve the formation of human capital in Minnesota in the coming years?** Adams recommended three action targets:

**1. Enhance active cooperation of school districts, high school counselors and vocational-technical schools in order to widen the paths to job training at vocational-technical colleges for high school students who may not be four-year-college-bound.** Adams suggested four ways this could be done:

**a. Convince Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) Chancellor Steven Rosenstone to promote this effort .** Emphasize, Adams said, that this effort is in MnSCU's interest, because it might improve high school graduation rates, while expanding MnSCU enrollments.

**b. Organize regular year-round field trips for high school students** across Minnesota, led by technical college instructors, to various places of employment and to the technical colleges themselves

**c. Identify examples where this effort is already underway** or beginning to happen, e.g., Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC), St. Cloud Technical & Community College and St. Paul College.

**d. Identify obstacles to undertaking such an effort statewide** and find ways to reduce or eliminate them. Take down those barriers between the high schools and community or technical colleges. "In an ideal world," Adams said, "kids would be able to transfer at age 16 to the community colleges. We would take away that boundary between grades 12 and 13."

**It's important for high school teachers and for professors to talk to their students about careers and to refer them to people who might be able to help them.** Adams asked why some high school teachers think they have only one job to do, such as teaching math. "But a lot of them do have a much broader definition of what their job is, which is to work with the kids to help them learn all they need to know, which is only partly math or physics. And most professors don't know how to do that, either, and don't think they should have to do it. I think the job definition at both levels should be broader."

**2. Clarify the distinctive missions of each segment of MnSCU-community colleges, technical colleges and state universities with the aim of reining in mission drift.** "The missions of each

school in MnSCU are explicit in statute, but they're all trying to do more," Adams said. "We've reached a peak in the number of kids of college age and the institutions' answer is to lobby hard for enhanced state and federal aid and to lower admission standards to get more kids coming who, in an earlier time, wouldn't have been going to college." He said the institutions' fixed costs are high and they don't know how to cut them down. "They're looking at red ink down the road," he said.

**3. Upgrade middle-management skills in Minnesota's colleges and universities.** Adams said the human resources department at the U of M is disproportionately about compliance and rules and regulations. But it should also be about talent development. "We hire faculty members without any attention to their ability to become leaders of their units and we don't provide them with any of that type of training," he said. "When I'm involved in interviewing and hiring faculty members, one of the things I look for is whether I can see that person as the future head of a department."

Adams suggested convening a task force that includes experienced college and university presidents, provosts and deans, both active and retired, to figure out:

- a. Ways to identify future leaders, managers and administrators** for Minnesota's public and private postsecondary institutions.
- b. How to provide them with continuing education and training** , so that when they are selected to assume leadership responsibilities, they are ready for the job.
- c. How to provide Minnesota's current higher education leaders, managers and administrators continuing education** to improve their effectiveness. "There's not another profession that has no requirements for continuing professional education other than higher education," Adams said. "You get your degree, you get your tenure and you do whatever you decide to do in your research and teaching until you die."

**College or university trustees who understand the big, long-term picture are responsible for looking at an institution's mission and helping chart a course based on that mission.** Adams said they listen to the president's proposals and must ask how they align with the mission. "But often that's not what they do at the U of M's Board of Regents," he said. "The higher education boards are faced with extremely difficult jobs, often exceeding their capabilities."

An interviewer commented that the most significant job of a higher education institution board is to pick the president. Adams agreed, but said the board should then keep the president on track and support him or her. "Board members often fail to do that at board meetings," he said.

Another interviewer remarked that in corporations, the role of the board of directors has changed over the last 10 years. "The administration works for the board and not the other way around," the interviewer said. "For a long time, it's been the other way around in both private and public institutions."

**We've started making careers out of what used to be vocations.** An interviewer remarked that we don't seem to talk about having a vocation anymore, i.e., to do something you're good at that can change the world. Adams responded, "When that happens, people begin thinking the University exists to give them a job." He said he used to speak each year to new professors, telling them, "We didn't

hire you to give you a good job and benefits. You're here to carry out the mission of the University." He noted that about half appeared to think that the University does indeed exist to give them a job. The other half seemed to understand that they were there to do something valuable for the world.

Another interviewer commented that the real recognition for faculty members comes from their siloed fields. Adams responded, "That's what it has become. But it doesn't have to be an either/or proposition. If the unit heads and deans knew how to do their jobs, they would be rewarding people on the basis of doing *all* those jobs. It doesn't usually work that way, though."

**Unions are well received at the MnSCU schools because in many schools, the middle management is often weak or inept and the union protects the faculty.** An interviewer asked whether the higher education unions and tenure discourage the kinds of faculty-management discussions that should take place. "There have to be folks in higher education who want to see reforms," the questioner said. "How are they even heard?"

"In the well-run departments at the U of M, such as Political Science over the years, no one would ever think of having a union," Adams said. "They all worked together as a team. The professors took turns running it and they were all very happy with their jobs. You don't have to have incompetent people running the units. The solution is not to get rid of the union, but to figure out a way to manage these places better."

**The rule rigidities that union contracts lead to at MnSCU diminish the role of leadership and management within the units and within the colleges.** Pretty soon, Adams said the administrative jobs become the better, higher paid jobs and the jobs that faculty members strive for. "In the unionized places, they're then kind of hamstrung in what they can do," he said. "It becomes a nasty, negative circle. It becomes more and more difficult to do the job of the stated mission of the organization. Then the schools fail to deliver a value to society equivalent to the amount of resources that are poured into them."

**Tenure is granted far too soon.** "You can't demonstrate your ability to perform in six years," Adams said. "Most professors are trained in research universities. What they think they should be doing is different from what they need to do if they're teaching in a community college or a four-year school. That's why you get mission creep, like St. Cloud University wanting to add a Ph.D. program. The school was never designed to offer Ph.D.'s. But people who work there went to research universities and in many cases that's a model, and a status, that they aspire to."

An interviewer commented that the critical issue is what the role of education in the future should be. The interviewer said there is no vision for that in Minnesota. The barrier between high school and postsecondary is disappearing, he continued. The idea of people sitting in class for 120 credits for graduation is disappearing. At the U of M, the administration and faculty are saying, "We have more applicants than we can deal with. Why do we have to change? Our model is not to change." The interviewer said the credit hour has nothing to do with competency.

Another interviewer commented that MnSCU Chancellor Steven Rosenstone is trying to connect with student needs and to meet the needs of employers across the state. "He's trying to adapt and is doing what we're talking about needing," the interviewer said. "But the U of M is reluctant to do so."

Adams replied that how well various colleges and departments at the U of M are doing on these fronts depends on the leadership in departments and on the deans of the colleges.

**In the last 50 years, we have reduced dramatically every measure of input in higher education.**

Adams noted that the semesters are shorter, the class hours are shorter and the number of courses students take is fewer. "But we're giving the same degrees and not asking if anyone has learned much," he said. "Part of the problem is that as the doors to higher education have opened wider since the 1960s, we seem to keep lowering the standards in high schools and the universities."

An interviewer commented that we keep rewarding failure. "We've treated public institutions almost as a free market, oblivious to the billions of dollars of public money going into them," the interviewer said. "We need to develop systems that will hold public institutions accountable."

**The merger of the technical colleges with the community colleges and the four-year colleges into MnSCU needs to be reexamined.** "Lumping them all together is to obscure the needs of the state and to obscure the differences among kids," Adams said. "We've muted the value of the technical colleges by yanking them out of their local communities and putting them into the MnSCU system." (Prior to the MnSCU merger, school districts ran the technical colleges located within their boundaries.) He noted that technical and community colleges do two separate jobs and have two separate missions. He has no problem with the community colleges and the four-year colleges being together in one system, but he said we should try to figure out how to reconnect the technical colleges with their local school districts and the needs of the state's regional economies.

"We need to be clearer about what the separate missions are so you don't have technical colleges that want to be community colleges and community colleges that want to be four-year schools and four-year schools that want to be research universities," he said. "That's not been an efficient use of resources in Minnesota." Adams commented that we should eliminate the barrier between grade 12 and grade 13 for people who are not going the conventional route to community colleges and four-year colleges.

**Cristo Rey High School demonstrates companies' willingness to work with schools to connect students to the real world.** [Cristo Rey](#) is a Jesuit-run Catholic high school in Minneapolis in which all students work one day a week in responsible jobs at local companies and a few nonprofits. Some of MnSCU's community and technical colleges are doing the same-and it's working well, Adams said.