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Iowa must retool to compete in science-based global economy

By FRED DORR

July 12, 2005

Math, science and engineering are courses our kids avoid. Meanwhile, China is challenging our country's traditional strength - its college and university system. Beijing's prestigious Tsinghua University is pushing to compete with Stanford, creating its own Chinese Silicon Valley in the process.

Tom Friedman's book, "The World Is Flat," underscores the issue. Our manufacturing jobs and white-collar work are being shipped out of the United States at an epidemic rate. If the past is prologue, our high-quality post-secondary education opportunities will follow. Newsweek tells us the Chinese economy is growing at 9 percent annually. As some have observed, China and India aren't racing us to the bottom - they're on their way to the top.

Recently The Des Moines Register noted that VeriSign Inc., the U.S.-based company operating the Internet's key address books, opened a research and development center in Bangalore, India.

Friedman says a "quiet crisis" is sweeping over us at warp speed. Its components: Reduced interest in hard sciences, our nation's ambition gap and the education gap.

American research-and-development dollars are being invested abroad, where scientists can be selected from a huge number of bright, ambitious and Internet-connected people in what dismissively has been referred to as Third-World countries. And they bring a strong work ethic and willingness to work for less.

We'd better come up with a response. If we don't, we'll look around and ask ourselves: What's left for us to do?

We need a plan to identify scientific issues to address in Iowa. They might include alternative energy sources, livestock and farming odor mitigation, water purity, chemical runoff and crop bioscience/genetic concerns. And then we must develop a private industry and government response. Potential steps:

- Fund a second phase of "Vision Iowa" to encourage the development of intellectual resources in our state.
- Involve Iowa businesses. Why should VeriSign go to Bangalore instead of Boone, Cedar Rapids or Orange City?
- Re-examine our curricular requirements. Are we world-class? Not in math and science.
- Create a governor's task force to visit our competitors' home countries. See what they do that we could do better. Have it develop a statewide initiative with recommended action items.

Friedman to visit Des Moines

Thomas Friedman, a Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times columnist and author of "The World is Flat," will address the National Governors Association Saturday in Des Moines. His topic is "Competing in a Flat World." NGA sessions are not open to the general public, but will be covered by the Register and other media.

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"Yankee ingenuity" is our logical response. Instead of accepting that our tax returns and our MRIs will be analyzed in India and manufacturing jobs will relocate to China, where the world's premiere universities will sprout, we need to react.

We have the talent pool, the hardworking spirit and the desire to pass on to our kids a better state than we inherited. Think of all the highly able people you know who moved elsewhere because science and engineering jobs weren't available. And think how it would benefit us to have those same individuals right here - helping grow our knowledge base, our economy and our employment options.

Bangalore is India's Silicon Valley. It is demonstrating it can compete with the world.

Give me kids from Decorah, Marcus, Fort Madison, Shenandoah and Ames. They'll be competitive anywhere. We just need to develop a thoughtful response to ensure future opportunity for all Iowans.

Maybe some of us don't know where Bangalore is, but ask 3M, Texas Instruments, Goldman Sachs, HP and Epson. They're already there.

If we're to offer an alternative, we'd best set our minds to it. And soon.

FRED DORR is an attorney and former West Des Moines school board member.



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