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Our Turn: Restore university funding; our economy depends on it

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For New Hampshire students to find good jobs here at home, for parents to be able to help students achieve their goal of higher education, and for businesses to have the skilled workforce they need to grow and prosper, the New Hampshire Legislature should not fund New Hampshire public colleges and universities at the lowest rate of any state in the nation.

The success of public higher education requires a true partnership with students and their families, higher education, businesses, citizens and the elected leaders of our state.

As New Hampshire business leaders who depend on an educated workforce to succeed and expand employment opportunities, we are joining the presidents of the state's four-year public colleges and universities in asking that the Legislature restore financial support to the 2010-11 level of \$100 million per year. Our collective future depends on it, and 71 percent of New Hampshire adults agree this should be a priority for the next Legislature, according to a recent poll by the UNH Survey Center.

In the short term, restored funding will help make higher education more affordable. New Hampshire students carry the largest debt load of any students in the nation. With the additional funds in-state students won't see an increase in tuition for two years, and there will be additional financial aid available for those with need.

As employers we are in desperate need of college graduates ready for the workplace, especially engineers, computer scientists and programmers. Our public institutions are responding to that demand, but they need state support.

The public university system is partnering with the community college system to double the number of highly qualified graduates in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM, disciplines by 2025. Currently the two systems graduate approximately 1,120 students in the STEM fields. The cost of restoring funding to \$100 million per year is minimal compared to the return on investment.

Adding more than 1,000 graduates in these much needed areas means those businesses already here can compete globally and grow, and new companies will be attracted to the state.

In the long term an increase in the state's highly qualified workforce also keeps more dollars in the state. Each year, the University of New Hampshire, Plymouth State University, Keene State College and Granite State College contribute more than \$2 billion to the economy in employment, direct expenditures, and work force development. These graduates will stay in the state – New Hampshire's four-year public colleges and universities graduate more than 6,500 people into the work force each year – to purchase homes, raise their children, pay taxes and work as our engineers, nurses, teachers, farmers, law enforcement officials and business leaders.

The facts are straightforward. For New Hampshire to grow its economy, attract new businesses and provide jobs for our economy, our colleges and universities must supply educated workers. The University System of New Hampshire has committed its limited resources to driving new and expanded educational programs where the state's work force development needs are the greatest.

We are proud to be their partners in this effort. It is time for the next governor and Legislature to make that same commitment to our state's future workforce and economic prosperity.

The nearly 50 percent cut lawmakers made in their support of higher education in 2011 was the largest in the history of higher education in America. New Hampshire now provides just 6 percent of the budget for our public universities and colleges – by far the lowest per capita level of support in the nation. If our lawmakers doubled its support New Hampshire would still be last.

This glaring lack of state support is threatening the current and future success of New Hampshire's economy. We urge students, parents and our business partners to contact your legislators and ask them to restore financial support to \$100 million per year. Our collective success depends on it.

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