

## Higher Education in Michigan The Fork in the Road

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The State of Michigan is in the most desperate financial condition in its modern history. It is the kind of crisis that should bring political leaders together for the betterment of our ten million fellow citizens. There is still time for good will, and good sense, to prevail.

First, let me say that this isn't just about money. State tax revenues are in a freefall and state government has been cutting services to which we've long been accustomed. This dynamic isn't likely to change. Reducing the size of government is never easy, and it represents unique challenges for elected bodies. Reductions on this scale are without precedent. Tempers grow short; suspicions grow long. Everything is on the table, as it should be.

But as we struggle to stabilize the present we risk our future by the mixed signals being sent to Michigan's youth. If we know one thing about the pickle we're in, it's that education is the way out. There will be few jobs for dropouts in the knowledge economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Every Michigan youth must plan on graduating from high school and then enrolling in a technical or career school, a community college, or a four year university. This pathway isn't debatable – education after high school is the new normal.

Government, education, and opinion leaders have spent a decade delivering that message. Yet, students and their families can be forgiven if they are confused by what they see and hear about higher education funding which, if nothing else, is a reflection of what government thinks is important. In some administrations, it is the last thing to be cut; in others, it is the first. State funding goes down, and the colleges are blasted when tuition goes up. Scholarships are created to make college more affordable, and then the assistance is cut, delayed, or changed -- sometimes even after the school year starts. Is this how a state that believes in the importance of higher education should behave?

The discussion has become all about money when instead it should be about the need to attend college even in difficult times, and develop the strategies to reinforce access and affordability. I believe that government and university leaders should be partners. It serves no one to have higher education seen as just another government program to fund or not, as changing revenues dictate. Higher education is the essential ingredient in our new economy. Our business leaders get it. They are clear that their survival depends on a diverse and educated workforce.

We need to support education beyond our words with deeds. If our leadership continues to disinvest in educational opportunity all of us - and Michigan itself - will be left behind.

A partnership requires partners. Surely we can agree that in these tough times, the one thing we shouldn't argue about is opportunity for and encouragement to the next generation. This is especially important now because if nothing changes Michigan is on course to have the most expensive public universities in the country. This will be uncharted territory. All of us in leadership positions must be partners in inspiring the next generation toward higher education in spite of our stormy financial seas.

Michigan's public universities are among the nation's very best. They provide economic stability in the communities where their campuses are located. They are engines of job creation. Our universities create the next generation of teachers, engineers, nurses, doctors, researchers, inventors, and community leaders.

An old adage is: "today's decisions are tomorrow's reality." We must not disregard our moral obligation to encourage, educate and enable our children, and provide opportunity for those adults returning to school. Let there be no doubt in the minds of our children and their families of the importance of education. Our financial stability and national prominence are at stake.