

Texas, your students need you — and you need them

State's prosperity depends on funding community colleges, say **CARY ISRAEL, WRIGHT LASSITER** and **LEONARDO DE LA GARZA**

More than 1,500 community college students recently converged on the steps of the Capitol for Community College Student Day. They represented all ages, ethnicities and socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. They were the face of Texas.

And they all had one common purpose — to share their appreciation for the affordable, quality education they receive at local community colleges. Each student went to Austin with a simple message for legislators: Now is the time to make community colleges a priority.

Our legislators face a tough challenge as they allocate funds for all the needs of our state. Among the most critical is increased funding for community colleges, an investment that simply makes economic sense.

We should ask ourselves: What would Texas' future look like without the

opportunities that these schools provide? Imagine an emergency room with no nurses or emergency medical technicians. Think about classrooms with fewer teachers or businesses without staffs or corporations without computer science specialists.

Chances are that every day you interact with community college graduates who either have completed their associate's degrees and transferred to universities for bachelor's or advanced degrees or who have finished professional technical certificates that enable them to contribute to our daily lives.

Without community college graduates in 2007, we would face drastic shortages like these: 11,000 health care professionals in Texas would disappear; ditto for 1,300 firefighters, 6,300 office professionals, and thousands of avionics technicians who keep our airplanes flying and mechanics who keep our cars running.

More than half a million students are enrolled in community colleges; that enrollment represents 75 percent of all freshmen and sophomores in Texas and 78 percent of all minority freshmen and sophomores.

Many of these students might never attend college at all without the affordable, convenient option they have in their own neighborhoods or across town.

As the state's population grows and more students enter higher education through community colleges, we must respond by providing more faculty, classrooms, laboratories, libraries, staff and facilities to help them succeed. We also must reach the goals of the state's "Closing the Gaps" initiative so that more than 600,000 additional students — many of them representing the state's minority groups — will go to college.

Without those students and future graduates, the Texas workforce will be woefully undereducated, and the average family income will drop significantly — several thousand dollars annually, according to state demographer Steve

Murdock — which means less tax revenue for the state.

The current appropriations bills being considered by the Legislature do not go far enough to benefit our students, communities and economic development initiatives. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has recommended nearly \$600 million in additional funding for community colleges because they know that the state's community colleges will be the primary point where existing education gaps are closed.

However, we are not seeking a "blank check" from the state. We do support defined accountability and outcome measures because we are committed to the success of our students.

We are fortunate that the North Texas legislative delegation understands the crucial role our colleges play. Community colleges statewide urge our legislators to support the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's recommendation for full formula funding.

More than 100,000 students from across North Texas are enrolled in credit

courses in Collin, Dallas and Tarrant counties. They will be tomorrow's nurses, radiology technicians, teachers, attorneys, culinary masters, automotive technicians, sociologists, firefighters, EMTs and counselors, to name only a few.

We need both the support and the funding that legislators and taxpayers can provide.

Our students deserve it.



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