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Midlands Voices: Public higher education proves greatly beneficial to Nebraskans

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The writer, of Lincoln, is president of the University of Nebraska system.

Patrick Durow's Dec. 19 Midlands Voices commentary ("Use 'private' remedy for college expenses") argued that more of the cost of public higher education should be shifted to individual students and their families.

Of course, there already has been a pronounced shift in funding public higher education in Nebraska (and most other states), with this state spending significantly less of its budget on higher education than it did in the 1980s. For at least two reasons, I hope the argument to make this shift even more dramatic is rejected in our state.

First, one consistent message I hear as I travel across Nebraska, and as I talk to policy-makers in Lincoln and Washington, is the need to keep public higher education affordable for students and their families. A number of interrelated factors are critical to affordability: moderate, predictable tuition increases, adequate financial aid, cost-effective operations and a stable base of state support.

Shifting even more of the cost to individual students and their families would prove harmful to Nebraska at the very time when we need to expand the benefits of public higher education.

There may be no more important strategy for a state's competitiveness in the 21st century than to increase the level of talent of the people who live and work there. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that about 90 percent of the fastest-growing jobs in the next decade will require some post-secondary education. For Nebraska to have a competitive economy in the 21st century, we need a solid base of talent to attract and grow jobs. We need more, not fewer, students attending the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and our other institutions.

Earlier in this decade, when states including Nebraska scaled back support for public universities, tuition costs rose dramatically. This increase adversely affected the ability of the middle class to afford college, and enrollments suffered. Both results were bad for Nebraska.

Of course there are personal benefits to higher education - as there are to education at all levels. But there is clearly a strong public interest in keeping public education affordable.

In addition to the dramatic impact education has on earning potential, research demonstrates many public benefits in addition to increasing our state's competitiveness. These benefits include a healthier citizenry, greater civic participation and lower levels of unemployment, public assistance and demand on the criminal justice system.

Second, it is beyond dispute that the mission and benefits of a large research university go well beyond educating students. Like all public universities, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln was created to serve multiple needs of the state. And while high-quality teaching is our highest priority, universities such as ours clearly do not exist solely to teach.

A significant portion of the university's state funding supports our other two missions: research and outreach. These are not and should not be included in tuition charges.

Last year, the University of Nebraska conducted more than \$250 million worth of research and development, which has many important benefits. These benefits include - based on U.S. Commerce Department analysis - more than 8,000 Nebraska jobs. It's no wonder that economists agree that research universities play a huge role in the development of high-wage, knowledge-based regional economies.

A Dec. 9 news story cited a study of the financial impact of just one campus - the University of Nebraska Medical Center and the related Nebraska Medical Center. The economic impact was \$1.5 billion per year and 17,000 jobs, not just in Omaha but across the state as well.

Add to that the impact of the even larger research enterprise at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and successful business partnerships at the Peter Kiewit Institute and the University of Nebraska at Omaha's south campus - now stretching from Dodge Street to Center Street - and you begin to see that many of the positive benefits of public higher education bear little relation to tuition charges.

Nebraska is beginning to enjoy the benefits of a research engine that has doubled in size in the past five years - bringing hundreds of millions of dollars into Nebraska. There is a palpable and understandable sense of optimism and potential among those who understand the important relationship of a leading university to its region.

Nebraskans benefit significantly from the economic and social impact of a vibrant, productive, outwardly focused system of public higher education, which contributes immeasurably to the quality of life and the economic growth of Nebraska. That's why we have public higher education, and that's why we need to keep it public.