

Kentucky's funding for postsecondary education: a quality of life issue

By Joanne K. Glasser, Esq., President, Eastern Kentucky University

Within the next few months, Kentucky's next governor and the General Assembly will begin wrestling with one of the Commonwealth's most challenging budgets in recent memory. They will face competing demands for limited resources to fund Medicaid, highway construction and crime prevention programs, to name but a few. They will also be given a great opportunity to support the continued improvement of the quality of life in Kentucky. In our ever-changing world, the link between higher education and quality of life is now clearer than ever.

Postsecondary education must continually stand among Kentucky's top funding priorities. Whenever the question is asked, "Can we afford to fund postsecondary education?" the answer must always be, "Can we afford not to?"

Postsecondary education is the Commonwealth's gateway to better and more affordable health care, improved infrastructure, crime prevention and the New Economy with increased opportunities for well-paying jobs.

I contend that postsecondary education is much more than simply an education issue — far from it. It actually is a quality of life issue. We see this each day with the need to provide affordable and accessible health care for ourselves, our children and our aging parents, with the continuous pursuit of more effective social services, safer and more secure communities, better schools and jobs that allow our citizens to achieve the American Dream.

The relationship between education and quality of life exists not only on the individual level but also on the community level.

On the individual level, postsecondary education touches our lives nearly every hour of the day through the people trained and educated to provide us with the products and services we use. Imagine our world without those prepared to tend to our health care needs, teach our children, or provide the other services and products that contribute to our individual quality of life.

Additionally, education enriches the social, intellectual, economic and cultural life of our communities. Communities rely on those skilled to engineer the construction of

our highways and buildings, including our homes; those knowledgeable of our community environmental, health and safety needs; those who respond to emergencies; those who create jobs; those who lead our governments; those prepared to develop technologies that improve our means of daily communication; and those who bring cultural and artistic riches to us.

Without an adequately funded postsecondary education system, the quality of our lives would be drastically and tragically altered. An excellent, well-funded postsecondary education system, as most will agree, actually improves the quality of life. It creates a healthier, more attractive business climate for industry; improves the quality of health care through advances in medical research; and prepares those who supply the workforce for our communities' schools, hospitals, public safety agencies and social services.

Our fine institutions are indeed preparing Kentuckians for life and the workplace. By producing a better-educated workforce, they are benefiting communities each day by increasing the Commonwealth's intellectual and financial capital.

We tend to measure education only in tangible terms of jobs or earning potential. While it is true that a highly educated citizenry opens the doors to better-paying jobs, the value of a strong system of postsecondary education is actually far greater.

Consider the tremendous cultural attractions and benefits, faculty who serve as community resources and the prestige that our institutions bring to Kentucky.

Consider, too, what a college education does for individuals. It opens their minds and hearts to new ideas and greater possibilities, raises their self-esteem and offers hope for a brighter tomorrow, not only for themselves but for their children as well.

The decisions made in Frankfort in the months ahead will directly affect the very quality and essence of life we Kentuckians have come to appreciate and seek to continue. Our Commonwealth's future depends on the understanding of state government that it takes a highly qualified, well-educated workforce to move Kentucky forward in the New Economy. That means postsecondary education must not become the "fall guy" to the challenges of tough economic times. Rather, it must become an integral part of our desire to become a national leader in advancing medical research, homeland security, Internet and computer technologies, commerce and entrepreneurship and cutting-edge P-16 classrooms.

We as Kentucky taxpayers must never accept what is second best for our children's education. Each of us must instill within them a deep-seated passion and appreciation for the value and impact education has on the quality of their lives.

Despite facing a formidable financial crunch in the state budget, we cannot afford to view postsecondary education reform as an "expense." To the contrary, such funding is a clear investment in the future of our students and our state.

Although we have made significant progress since 1997, we must remember that educational reform is never a final destination, but a constant journey challenged by an ever-changing world.

We must strive to push forward to make postsecondary education accessible, affordable and challenging for all Kentuckians, regardless of age, gender or ethnicity. Technological advances and a competitive global marketplace demand that we provide our students with the finest educational opportunities.

We must not lose sight of our goal to achieve statewide educational excellence. We have come much too far to go backward.

We cannot cut our way to excellence. We must always make the funding of postsecondary education a priority in Kentucky. After all, education is and will continue to be the best investment we can make for the future of our children and our Commonwealth.

Let it be said of us years from now that Kentucky's progress in 2003 and 2004 was fueled by our collective recognition and wisdom that education truly pays — not just for a few — but for the entire state's economic, social and intellectual well-being. Once accomplished, we will then become what our early settlers envisioned Kentucky to become one day — "The Land of Tomorrow."

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