

The Role of Higher Education in the Future of Kansas

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In September 2010, the Kansas Board of Regents approved a 10-year strategic agenda for the state's public higher education system. Entitled *Foresight 2020*, the plan sets long-range achievement goals to address attainment, economic alignment, and university excellence. The goals were visionary and lofty, and supported by meaningful metrics to ensure accountability.

As promised, over the past five years a progress report has been produced annually – modified and improved along the way to remain responsive and transparent. And progress has been made, both in the measures reported and in the development of new policies and collaborative initiatives.

However, it is troubling that over these same years, state financial support for the higher education system has essentially remained flat, with just over \$744 million appropriated in FY2010 and approximately \$749 million appropriated for this current year.

If postsecondary educational attainment in Kansas isn't increased, decreases in personal income per capita, lost income and sales tax revenues to the state, declining federal revenues, and lost savings in both Medicaid and Corrections budgets are expected.

The economic picture is clear: increased educational attainment brings prosperity to Kansas.

Workforce projections published by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce have continued to adjust the percentage of Kansans it predicts will need some kind of postsecondary credential, but the latest estimates suggest the need to be 71 percent. The Center has also ranked Kansas 13th in terms of the proportion of 2018 jobs that will require a bachelor's degree. Moving the attainment needle won't be easy, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try – it is critical to the long-term economic success of Kansans.

The good news is that we have experienced success partnering with the state of Kansas to address critical workforce shortages in targeted areas.

In 2011, Kansas passed the University Engineering Initiative Act to leverage industry collaboration with clear goals and targeted financial support from the state – matched dollar-for-dollar by every university participating – to increase the number of engineering graduates by more than fifty percent in ten years.

After four years of effort, we are nearly half way toward closing the gap, having already increased the annual number of engineering graduates by nearly 300, and industry leaders are delighted with the increased availability of new engineers.

In 2012, Governor Sam Brownback launched a plan to enhance career technical education and better prepare high school students for college and careers. Today, high school students have the opportunity to enroll in career technical programs tuition-free, fully supported by state funding.

This support has driven enrollments to over 10,000 high school students annually, an increase of more than 6,000 students per year, with graduating high school seniors having earned over 1,200 industry-recognized credentials.

Why have these initiatives, with conservative investment from the state, worked so well?

Targeted initiatives engage industry leaders who bring necessary experience and resources to the project. Additionally, these initiatives don't start from scratch – or a greenfield – but launch from a historical foundation of stable state financial support.

Leveraging base state funding, critical to the everyday operation of the university or college, allows for relatively small investments to make a significant impact.

Looking to the future, a reliable partner is necessary to share in the investment needed. Our higher education system in Kansas is strong and making progress, and if we correct this erosion of state support, we can increase educational attainment, solve critical workforce shortages, and make Kansas the prosperous state we all desire.