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Higher ed in Washington needs more support

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When the celebrations are over, our future leaders — today's college and high school graduates — are going to wake up to some real challenges as they start out in the world.

The season of college commencements and high school graduations is usually a time of joy and optimism as these new graduates celebrate their accomplishments and make big plans for the future. But this year there's way too much bad news.

The economy remains down in the dumps, and college grads face the toughest job market in memory. High school grads will find that public colleges and universities are being forced to raise tuition dramatically while simultaneously reducing enrollment. But the issue affects us all, as this is happening at the time when we need bright young talent to come in with new ideas and fresh perspective in order to revitalize Washington's workplaces and economy.

The job market will recover. The economy will right itself. But I'm worried that the bad news has some bright young people disheartened and ready to throw in the towel.

My company, Procter & Gamble, is a proud sponsor of the Costco Scholarship Fund, a program administered by the College Success Foundation to provide financial assistance to highly qualified underrepresented minority students who wish to attend Seattle University or the University of Washington.

I attended the fund's annual breakfast last fall and was impressed with the marvelous stories from scholarship recipients about what they were accomplishing and how the financial assistance made it possible.

I was moved by the story told by Melvin Pretlow, a recipient of a Costco scholarship who sat at my table at breakfast. A Seattle University finance major, he is an impressive young man, but shared with us that he was having second thoughts about his career choice. He was disillusioned by the greed and poor behavior that had contributed to the economic downturn and was questioning if this was still the right career field for him. I counseled him to stick with it, as all these events were exactly why the finance industry needs bright young people like him to come in with optimism and ethics and make a difference.

There are thousands of students like Melvin out there. Bright, talented, loaded with potential, but confronting the tough realities that college may not be available or in reach for them.

What we as a society — business, the Legislature, individuals — very much need to do is pull together and commit to finding the wherewithal and the resources to increase our ability to tap and develop future talent, not to scrimp on higher education when our state and nation need to be preparing the leaders and job creators of the future.

A big part of the task falls to the Legislature, of course. Lawmakers did well in actually increasing state financial aid programs — an aspect of the college equation that often gets ignored in the news coverage — but the decrease in enrollment at a time when Washington businesses are crying out for well-educated talent is disappointing.

The buck may stop with the governor and Legislature, but it starts with us. There are a number of things that businesses and individuals can do to help. We can urge the government to give better support for higher education.

We can urge support for financial aid programs that make college accessible and affordable for low- and middle-income students who attend colleges, public or private, in our state. And we can and must take on some of the responsibility and do it ourselves.

Support colleges, and don't forget private institutions which, while individually relatively small, together confer about a quarter of the bachelor's and higher degrees earned in Washington each year.

I serve on the board of their association, Independent Colleges of Washington (ICWashington.org), which raises funds for scholarships for students at all 10 of its member institutions. Donating to ICW is an easy way for companies and individuals to support deserving students at great colleges all over the state.

Let's step up and support higher education opportunity in Washington wherever and whenever we can.

The problems of the future are getting more complex, and will ultimately be addressed by and solved by "future" leaders — those high school grads that we need to develop in our colleges today. Find a way you can help — our future depends on it.

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