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Support our colleges and graduates

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As spring brings the excitement and celebration of graduation ceremonies, we congratulate all of our graduates on their success and wish them exciting opportunities in beginning the next phase of their lives. This year, San Diego's college graduates represent more than their accomplishments – they remind us of the investment that must be made in higher education if we are to ensure a strong economic, intellectual and skills-based work force in the future.

Today, the region's public institutions of higher education are under a financial cloud during a time when the sun should be shining on our graduates. These graduates deserve happiness and a sense of pride in reaching their educational milestones, yet most will also feel a palpable sense of uncertainty about their job prospects in the current weak economy.

We – the San Diego Community College District; the University of California San Diego, California State University San Marcos and San Diego State University – have done our job in preparing and educating students to excel in their future. But in this economic climate, no amount of proactive career programs, alumni networking opportunities or the reputation of an alma mater can combat the effects of the state of California's reduced commitment to higher education.

In light of the global financial crisis, we are all valiantly managing budgetary challenges that will impact our campuses for years to come. But in spite of this, our graduating classes will be the ones bearing the burden if the investment in higher education dwindles any further. They are the bridge to a very difficult road ahead. We must pay attention and act now.

Our region's long-term economic strength, and our leadership in cultural affairs and the arts and sciences, are inextricably linked to the success of our institutions of higher education. San Diego's two- and four-year colleges provide students with the knowledge and skills required to make contributions to society.

Our hopeful graduates, whether they majored in biology, psychology, occupational therapy, history, theology, communications or engineering, possess much more than cutting-edge skills. They also embody a spirit of volunteerism and service that is urgently needed by nonprofit and philanthropic organizations from San Ysidro to New Orleans to Darfur. We must consider all options to help San Diego's 22,000 recent college graduates and the regional economy.

The governor and the Legislature must not give up on our students – they are the best investment we can make to stimulate California's economic recovery and long-term economic health. Unfortunately, California's funding for higher education is in a prolonged state of decline. As an example, the share of the state's budget allocated to the University of California system has fallen from 8 percent in the 1960s to just 3 percent today. California's four-year public universities are being forced to increase student fees, even during these hard times, to make up for state budget cuts. (Fees at community colleges are set by the Legislature.)

Reductions in California's investment in higher education can insidiously erode the economic potential of the San Diego region. What must we do to maintain the diversity and quality of our students, faculty and programs? A fresh approach is needed now, more than ever, to help our universities and community colleges. This realization has prompted the institutions of higher education in San Diego to increasingly rely on supplemental funding sources: support from private foundations and donors.

Charitable individuals and businesses have supported the construction of facilities that benefit our campuses as well as our local communities, ranging from a new biosciences center and Southern California's only pharmacy school to athletics fields, conference facilities and a state-of-the-art music center – and so much more. The generosity of our donors is matched only by their optimistic vision of what San Diego can become, how our work here impacts the rest of the world, and pragmatic approaches for how we can get there.

We are working together to establish ways to preserve the environment, make our campuses and communities more sustainable and affordable, maximize opportunities for interdisciplinary scholarly pursuits and share faculty expertise. This model of collaboration is needed more now than ever from philanthropic leaders and visionaries to help our universities and community colleges train the next generation of skilled workers that San Diego's industries, health care providers and other enterprises need in order to grow and prosper.

As public universities and community colleges, we continue to seek state, federal and foundation support – but we must also rely on private stakeholders to keep the doors open. When you hear of college graduations, think of the future. Support of public higher education by private citizens, business and foundations will ensure that students will be trained for leadership and prepared to positively impact the future economic vitality of San Diego and beyond.

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The San Diego Community College District serves over 50,000 students at our three colleges, City College, Mesa College, and Miramar College. An additional 50,000 students enroll in classes for adult learners at our six Continuing Education (CE) campuses and 200 community facilities. Local residents enroll in over 16,600 classes offered by the District throughout the City. The District also provides education and training to over 50,000 members of the US military stationed throughout the US.