

For many parents and students, universities are at their best when they offer small classes, great professors and lots of choices.

Others define great universities as sources of new ideas, technologies and a skilled workforce – all key in an economic downturn.

With regional campuses, research institutions and liberal arts colleges, Florida's 11 public universities could hardly be more diverse. But we believe that as a group, we should meet all expectations in the Sunshine State. That is why we urge Floridians to help alleviate a major shortfall in higher education dollars by supporting a bill that would give universities flexibility to raise their tuitions up to a set cap.

Whether at the University of Florida in Gainesville (enrollment: 51,474) or New College of Florida in Sarasota (enrollment: 767), students hope to benefit from the same touchstones of a memorable college experience.

An intimate classroom environment. A teacher who knows and enthuses about her subject. An assortment of classes and degrees rich enough to make it tough to choose.

This was never easy to pull off during Florida's many years of rapid growth. But now, cultivating this environment has become nearly impossible. Two intersecting trends are to blame: Florida's low tuition, and major budget cuts in the past two years resulting from the slumping economy.

Attending college in Florida has always been a bargain. Our universities' average tuition of about \$3,800 is about half the nation's average tuition and less than the typical annual cost of daycare for one child. And many of our students don't pay anywhere near \$3,800. That's because the Bright Futures Scholarship Program or other scholarships foot all or most of their bills. In fact, when federal and state aid are factored in, students in Florida only pay 10 percent of the cost of earning their degrees.

There's nothing wrong with being a bargain -- as long as students can get a solid education.

The problem is, that can't continue. Forced against the wall by the downturn, the state has slashed \$285 million from higher education funding, leading to widespread layoffs, hiring freezes and cutbacks.

There are fewer classes, and more students packed into them. Lecterns stand unoccupied; star faculty departed for better jobs elsewhere. In libraries, students and scholars scour a shrinking list of databases and journals. Several universities have frozen or cut freshman enrollment, squeezing already pinched access for high school students. All this has occurred in a period when applications to universities typically rise, as unemployed workers seek to improve their marketability through education.

Although next year's budget remains in flux, universities are anticipating more tough reductions. Elimination of entire departments – even whole colleges – is in the offing.

If these trends continue, they will seriously erode the quality of a Florida degree. That will devalue students' qualifications not only in the eyes of graduate schools -- but also employers. In the long term, universities will lose the ability to help drive the economy forward.

Anyone living in a university community knows it is a key economic anchor. But although it is less visible, universities also play that role statewide.

Florida faculty bring into the state an estimated \$1.2 billion annually in federal and private research grants. That money does far more than pay for the purchase of equipment or the salaries of graduate students. It leads to innovations that become the seeds of new startup companies and expansion of existing companies. That boosts high-skilled, high-paying jobs and helps Florida stay in front of important industry trends. For example, biotechnology -- and especially now, green energy technology.

If all this seems far removed from the tuition flexibility bill making its way through the legislature, it is not.

Fewer, less experienced faculty not only mean fewer classes and fewer degrees, they also mean fewer research dollars, fewer innovations, less economic activity. Student and entrepreneur, in other words, are both in the crosshairs.

The tuition authority bill, sponsored by Sen. Ken Pruitt (R-Port St. Lucie) and Rep. Will Weatherford (R-Wesley Chapel) would allow universities to raise their per-credit tuition as much as 15 percent annually until it reaches the national average. It does not require a tuition hike. Instead, it gives individual universities the ability to price its tuition according to local market value -- within the caps.

Will the bill, which is supported by Gov. Charlie Crist and the Senate Higher Education Committee, solve all universities' problems? Absolutely not.

But even if budget cuts are as severe as predicted, it will allow us to devote extra dollars to the areas each university feels are most important. As Florida struggles with the recession, that will enable our universities to remain valuable partners in its recovery -- as educators for Florida's young people, and as innovators for its economy.

Signed by...

Florida A&M President James Ammons

University of Central Florida President John C. Hitt

Florida Atlantic University President Frank T. Brogran

University of Florida President J. Bernard Machen

Florida Gulf Coast University President Wilson G. Bradshaw

University of North Florida President John A. Delaney

Florida International University President Modesto A. Maidique

University of South Florida President Judy L. Genshaft

Florida State University President T.K. Wetherell

University of West Florida President Judith A. Bense

New College of Florida President Gordon E. Michalson, J.