Independent boards for our major universities and a new, coordinated system of education from pre-school to graduate school are getting much of the attention from lawmakers in Salem this year. These reforms are important, but they shouldn't distract us from boosting our state's commitment to post-secondary education as the pathway to opportunity for our people and prosperity for our state. That commitment will require not only reform but investment.

Two years ago, the Oregon legislature established one of the most ambitious goals for education in the country – to have 40 percent of our adults with a four-year college degree, 40 percent with a two-year degree or certificate and the remaining 20 percent with at least a high school diploma by the year 2025.

Known as “40-40-20,” this goal represents more than a hopeful scenario for a better Oregon. It is an imperative for our future. States that invest in post-secondary education will be best-positioned to succeed in the knowledge-based global economy of the 21st century; those that fail to do so will shortchange their people, stifle job creation and stunt their progress.

The data show that we will need to produce an additional 46,000 four-year degrees and 200,000 more two-year degrees and certificates to achieve our college completion goals by 2025. Our community colleges and universities are trying to get us there – by collaborating, doing more with less and producing bachelor’s degrees at less cost to the state than most public university systems in the U.S. But they cannot make the progress demanded by our 40-40-20 goals when they are forced to make do with declining state support for our students.

Oregon is now 46th of the 50 states in per-student funding for its community colleges and public universities. In the university system, inflation-adjusted state support has declined by 18 percent on a per-student basis. Yet enrollment rose by 22 percent in our public universities from 2007 to 2011 and by 37 percent at our community colleges in the same period. These were the largest enrollment gains of any state in the country.

How have our colleges and universities managed to accommodate this demand? Show up at midnight at Clackamas Community College to see one example in the college’s welding class. Or, visit Western Oregon University to witness its success with first-generation Latino students. Our community colleges and universities deserve great credit for responding to the burgeoning demand for post-secondary education with creativity, cost-cutting and resourcefulness. But they need more than kudos. They need funding. And our working families cannot keep plugging the funding gap by paying higher tuition.

It costs the state approximately $20,000 to fund a four-year degree; but it costs the student another $30,000 in tuition and fees. For a two-year degree from a community college, the current costs average $12,500 for the state and local taxpayers and $12,500 from students. Students are paying more and borrowing more to complete their educations, but an increasing number of them and their families will be priced out of this pathway to opportunity under the budget now being considered by the legislature’s Ways and Means
Committee.

We cannot expect Oregon's working families to continue to pay tuition increases of six percent a year when median family incomes are rising at half that rate. And we cannot expect our colleges and universities to educate more students in high-quality degree programs without greater support from the state.

For this reason, our coalition of business and community leaders, known as The Oregon Idea, is asking the legislature to approve an additional $140 million (less than one percent of the state's general fund budget) for our community colleges and universities to meet the needs of a new generation of students and achieve our goals for a well-educated citizenry, a productive workforce and a dynamic economy.

Students and their families have been stepping up and paying more. Our colleges and universities have been responding with creativity and resourcefulness. It's time for the state to begin to match their efforts with the funding needed to ensure that a new generation of Oregonians can complete their educations, sustain our economy and contribute to our communities. Please join us in this effort. For more information, go to the TheOregonIdea.org.

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Editor's Note: Oregon Business accepts opinion pieces on topics relevant to the state's business community. See Op-Ed submission guidelines here.