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Universities need support

Increase in funding necessary to maintain our way of life, free society

by **Joaquin Ruiz** and **John Schwarz**

Public universities are like the canary in the coal mine. As public universities go, so will our way of life.

However, public support for public universities across the country has been on the decline. Since 2007, universities have suffered sizeable cuts in state funding. The result has been the loss of faculty and staff -- even as tuition is increased to help cover the gap.

This trend will eventually limit access to higher education for many and also bring a serious decline in the quality of our public universities.

Should we care?

Yes. Public universities are indispensable to the sustenance, success, and continuation of a free society. The vibrancy and vitality the U.S. is known for is a function of the greatest public higher education system in the world. Universities promote critical thinking and prosperity, both of which are required for a working democracy.

The effectiveness of a free society depends upon developing a mentality that, based upon reason and evidence, is willing and able to question authority. The development of this mentality takes place far more in universities and colleges than anywhere else in our educational system.

As taught at universities, the scientific method, the social sciences, the arts and the humanities give considerable emphasis to the process of reasoning, to questioning and criticism, and to the value and skill of reaching conclusions based upon evidence.

Virtually the whole of our knowledge enabling us to understand how we affect our world and how our world affects us comes from research undertaken in universities. Such research informs the debates on many issues vital to the nation's future. During these debates, such knowledge also helps identify and correct misinformation. If we allow the quality of our universities to decline, the quality of our political debate and governance will decline as well.

Free societies also require economic prosperity. In its absence, few societies are able to remain free, democratic, and stable for very long. Our country's founders, including Jefferson, Madison, and Adams, believed that gaining economic security and independence for the greatest possible portion of the citizenry is essential for nurturing and sustaining a free society.

Over the past century, universities have been the principal engine of increased and sustained economic prosperity for our nation. From cardiac catheterization, developed at Columbia University, to World Wide Web browsers developed at the University of Minnesota and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, scientific innovations produced in the laboratories of our universities have spawned myriad industries and tens of millions of well-paying jobs. The U.S. economy is now driven by industries that did not exist 50 years ago.

The founders of industries such as Facebook, Google, Hewlett-Packard, Intel, Yahoo, and locally, Ventana Medical Systems and Burr-Brown, did so after pursuing higher education.

A university education provides people with access to high-paying jobs -- jobs that deliver economic security and independence. A worker with a college degree earns about \$25,000 more per year than one with only an associate's or high school degree. That translates to \$1 million of additional earnings over a 40-year working career.

Our public universities and colleges constitute an entirely self-funded investment. The additional taxes received from those higher-earning workers more than covers the cost of public funding for higher education. In addition, the government receives additional tax revenue from the new industries that academic innovations help spawn. Therefore, universities and colleges add substantially more money to public revenues than they cost in public funding. It is hard to imagine a better investment.

But as states withdraw support for their higher education systems, the difference in quality between the private universities and the public universities will grow.

Our public higher education system, the greatest in the world, has been key to helping people get ahead. The social mobility our public universities provide is essential to the success of our free and democratic society.

If we reduce our support for public higher education, we are in danger of creating a system that contributes to having separate and unequal classes within society and fostering resentment between the have-nots and the haves.

We must support the core institutions that make our way of life possible. Public universities are one of those core institutions.

Joaquin Ruiz is executive dean of the Colleges of Letters, Arts and Science at the University of Arizona. John Schwarz is professor emeritus of political science at the University of Arizona.