Part of the genius of American higher education is its ability to strengthen the social and economic fabric of the country by meeting the dreams of individual citizens. The real value of higher education lies in this dual benefit.

However, increasingly, higher education is valued more as a means of personal financial advancement than for its societal good. And the long-term benefit of a college degree is clouded by the economic uncertainty of the moment.

An article in The Eagle demonstrated both of these points ("These days, is college a good value?" Jan. 24 Local & State).

The article emphasized the current difficulty students face in scraping together the financial resources to continue work toward a degree. The question was portrayed as entirely proximate: If I spend the money to go to school, will I immediately get a good job when I graduate?

The personal value of obtaining a college degree extends through an entire lifetime. College graduates make more money in their work careers. Even in these times, where the struggle to pay tuition is indeed difficult for many, nearly every study has shown that getting a college degree is one of the very best investments one can make in a lifetime.

College graduates also contribute more and take less from society. During their lifetime they pay more taxes, enjoy better health, are less likely to be involved in criminal activity, and are more likely to volunteer in their communities and to vote.

As with the article in The Eagle, more and more, these community benefits are viewed as less valuable than the personal advantage of a college degree.

One of the most obvious manifestations of this is the trend, now more than a decade in duration, of state disinvestment in higher education. The 12 percent decline in state funding we have absorbed in Kansas over the past 18 months was preceded by more than a decade of steady decline in the proportion of university budgets supported by state funds. We see this trend in nearly every state.

State disinvestment in higher education is dangerous for a number of reasons.

First, not investing in higher education means not investing in innovation, discovery, work force preparation and the growth of intellectual capital, all prominent features of the legendary American ingenuity.

Secondly, not investing in higher education means not investing in economic recovery and economic growth at the precise time of critical need. There is little doubt that universities — particularly research universities such as Wichita State — are critical drivers of the state economy. The importance of the National Institute for Aviation Research in the local manufacturing economy is unquestioned. The business plan for the Center of Innovation for
Biomaterials in Orthopaedic Research anticipates the creation of a new manufacturing sector and new jobs in the Wichita area using our local expertise in advanced composite materials in new ways. These are only two examples of how universities can work in partnership with business and government to sustain economies.

Finally, as state support decreases, tuition increases. The result is an educational class system where access to four-year public universities is becoming increasingly restricted to the wealthy.

Obtaining a college degree is unquestionably an achievement that will bring lifetime benefit even if the investment is difficult to make in these tough economic times. But there are also enormous benefits to society as a whole from having a large and diverse proportion of the population with college degrees.

As our elected officials struggle to reconcile the state budget, it will be important to keep both of these values of higher education in mind.

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