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Pam Byrnes: State has to invest in higher education

State Rep. Pam Byrnes

is a Chelsea Democrat.

As chair of the committee responsible for higher education spending in the House of Representatives, I read with great interest a commentary ("Pumping money into universities won't propel an economic surge," Aug. 22) suggesting that the less we spend on higher education, the better off Michigan will be.

It should be clear to everyone that Michigan's job No. 1 must be to get more college graduates in our state. It is a fact that the states with the highest per capita income are those with the most college graduates.

Michigan's universities are the best tool state leaders have for creating more college graduates and attracting college graduates from outside of Michigan. Yet, for the last seven years, since we started cutting the state's income and business tax, we have been forced to cut state support for higher education.

Michigan spends \$2,666 per student less than it would if it had just increased the 2000 level of support by the rate of inflation. Meanwhile, surrounding states have boosted spending on higher education.

Michigan's universities are in competition with universities around the world for the best and brightest. Some people are now saying we should give up on higher education. Instead of attracting the best professors with good salaries, they are saying we should let those professors go to other states. Instead of having top-notch laboratories, they say we should make our students do with second-rate facilities.

The result will be the loss of Michigan's future to those states who do have the best professors and the finest labs. That brain drain will doom Michigan to becoming just another low-income state.

We should be investing in everything needed to attract talent to our state. It's no accident that states like Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland and New Jersey lead the nation in income. It's because they have more college graduates.

Authors Richard Vedder and Bryan O'Keefe extol the virtues of low-tax states, while failing to point out that most low-tax state are also low-income states.

Michigan can keep cutting taxes, cut spending on higher education and become a low-income state. Or we can restore tax rates to the same levels they were in the late 1990s, when our state was prosperous, invest in higher education, and become a high-income state. The answer seems clear to me.

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