



Dear Editor:

When it comes to education and money, two questions permeate conversations from the halls of the Capitol to the booths of the local coffee shop: How much is enough? How can we get the best return on the state's investment in education?

Mississippi has had success in recent years attracting advanced manufacturing to the state. Some have even expanded operations; thereby, creating more jobs. When considering a site, companies look at the workforce. In addition to looking for skilled trades, they also ask: Are there engineers and programmers available to do the job? Are there doctors, nurses and other health care professionals available to provide health care to their workers? Are there teachers to teach their children?

Mississippi Public Universities are doing their part—enrolling 94,000 students in an academic year and awarding more than 16,000 degrees, which represents a 10.9 percent increase over the past five years. It is often reported that, both locally and nationally, we need more workers with science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) degrees. Over the past five years, the number of undergraduate STEM degrees at our universities has increased by an astounding 34.6 percent. Graduate STEM degrees have increased by 18.5 percent.

Beyond the STEM fields, universities prepare all students to think critically, maintain flexibility and master problem-solving so that they will be resilient in an ever-changing job market. Through teaching, research and service, Mississippi Public Universities touch every facet of our lives, from agriculture that provides the meals we serve on our tables to developing treatments for our most pressing health problems to the social sciences that help us better understand the world in which we live. All of this depends upon talented, dedicated faculty members to teach, lead and guide students. Attracting and retaining the best and brightest faculty are crucial to the success of our students and our state.

Mississippi must have a strong system of universities to help advance the state. Mississippi's public university graduates contribute more than \$245 million to the state's economy within five years after graduation. If we increase the number of Mississippians with a bachelor's degree by just 10 percent, we could gain more than \$200 million in additional tax revenue each year. Revenue increases like that would ensure enough funding to tackle many of Mississippi's most pressing issues.

As our economy rebounds, let's invest now in our public universities because our future depends upon it. We urge legislators to take this moment in history to invest strategically in Mississippi's universities, which will allow our state to reap the benefits of that investment for years to come.

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