

CFA report paints grim picture of education and economy

Donna Tam/The Eureka Times-Standard

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A recently released report emphasized the symbiotic relationship between the state's economy and its educational system by painting a grim picture of the state's deteriorating education levels.

The California Faculty Association commissioned the report, "California at the Edge of a Cliff: The Failure to Invest in Public Higher Education is Crushing the Economy and Crippling out Kids' Future," two years ago because it recognized the impact a suffering economy would have on higher education funding, according to John Travis, past president of the CFA and a professor of political science at Humboldt State University.

"We wanted to know what impact is this likely to have on California and its ability to recover from economic downturn," he said.

Although HSU has not been as impacted by recent cuts to enrollment that hit other colleges in the California State University system, Robin Meiggs, HSU's CFA representative, said the report may be an indicator that the college may not be able hold on to growing enrollment numbers for much longer.

"With the rising costs of education going up, that could be detrimental to our enrollment," she said, adding that higher education funding has been cut by 40 percent since 1980.

According to the report, California now ranks 21st among the states in investment efforts. Twenty-eight years ago, it ranked 11th.

"It's ultimately going to fall on the backs of the average working Americans and their families," Meiggs said, adding that it seems counterproductive to cut the potential workforce while trying to address an economic crisis.

The report also shows an overarching theme of high school students not continuing on to college, with the continuation rate slipping from 66.4 in 1996 to 43.7 percent in 2004.

Humboldt County Office of Education Superintendent Garry Eagles said the situation with affordable higher education is becoming more prominent. Eagles, along with Greater Eureka Chamber of Commerce Executive Director J Hockaday, was recently appointed to a statewide panel aimed at developing materials encouraging the development of a more skilled workforce for businesses throughout California.

"A bigger issue with a reduced workforce may be preparedness beginning at a very young age," he said, adding that the district implements many programs to encourage the continuation of students' education through college, including a program called the

Parent Institute for Quality Education, which educates the parents of elementary-age students on the importance of being active in their children's education. Since starting the program three years ago, there has been a noticeable increase of parent attendance at open houses and back to school nights, and data from a similar program showed that students in the program were more likely to go on to college, Eagles said.

While that program may be successful in keeping continuation rates up, Eagles emphasized that the district's goal is not to send every student to college.

"What we want to do is to make sure that when student graduates they have an abundance of options," he said.

Hockaday said education is a very important part of providing business with qualified employees. He agrees that teaching skills such as responsibility and accountability are important in the development of skilled work force for the future.

"Job preparedness really begins with work ethic development that is important that is generated through early school years," he said. Hockaday said the current pinch on schools and businesses alike illustrates the report's findings on the relationship between the economy and education.

"I think it's time to have that conversation with the way the economy is and all of us will have to do more with less," he said.

California ranks:

- * 49th in its population age 25 and over with high school diplomas
- * 47th in high school graduates that continue on to college in 2004
- * 46th in of 19-year-olds that were enrolled in college in 2004
- * 31st in college participation fro 18 to 24-year-old student from low income families in 2006
- * 21st in appropriated state tax funds for operations of higher education

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