

Today's desperate economy has hammered home a point that we've all known for a very long time: that higher education is the gateway to a better future. Now more than ever, students need to go that extra step in their education to secure high-paying, stable work outside of the classroom.

However, the crisis that has hit every economic sector has created new challenges for higher education in New Jersey and around the world. High school students who would have relied on their parents' savings accounts to go to college are watching those savings dry up as investments fail and funds are needed for living expenses. The cost of a college education has made it an unattainable goal for other families living paycheck to paycheck. Student financial assistance has become more competitive, and the turmoil in the job market has driven many adults to re-enter the academic world, creating a new student demographic interested in achieving better job security, retooling their resumes, and enhancing their earning potential.

Unfortunately, to become or stay relevant in today's job market, the new crop of college students must sacrifice a large portion of their future earnings to student debt. And because New Jersey has not met its commitment to keep the cost of earning a college degree affordable, many are simply forgoing a chance at a brighter future.

Because of our inaction to keep college affordable, we are seeing the best and brightest students leave the State for better opportunities elsewhere. Not only are we losing these students that New Jersey tax dollars have helped to educate through our high-achieving public schools, but we are also losing the promise of our future – the thousands of bright young adults who can enhance our workforce and our economy. When our students ultimately plant their roots somewhere other than home, other states benefit from our investment.

As a lifelong proponent of higher education, I recognize that we have to do more to help students seeking to achieve a college degree in New Jersey.

I have authored two bills – S-1345 and S-1566 – which would expand the Tuition Aid Grant (TAG) program to part-time college students. Extending TAG to cover these students is an effective and affordable means of keeping costs under control for struggling students.

I also co-sponsored legislation establishing NJ STARS, a scholarship program for residents that covers the cost of tuition and certain fees at New Jersey's nineteen community colleges. Those who graduate in the top fifteen percent of their high school class are eligible.

New Jersey's community colleges offer challenging coursework at a fraction of the cost of a four-year institution. Many have implemented honors programs for their most dedicated students, and all offer a more affordable first step towards a post-high school degree. Though they are often overlooked, the affordability and opportunities at our

community colleges may be our biggest asset to combat the “brain drain” in the Garden State.

Through partnerships with four-year colleges and universities, community colleges are becoming a more attractive option. Almost all community colleges in New Jersey allow for credit-transferring to four-year schools, and more than half offer bachelor’s programs in specialized curriculum areas. Through these programs, students can attend class at their local community college at reduced tuition rates. In my district, Mercer County Community College has recently collaborated with William Paterson University to offer bachelor’s degrees in education, liberal studies and psychology. Nursing and business administration programs are already offered through Felician College and Fairleigh Dickinson University.

While these programs offer a good first step to addressing the affordability gap in New Jersey’s colleges and universities, ultimately there is more to do. Until we can increase State funding to help offset the costs of financing higher education, everything else will be just a band-aid on a much larger wound. We must do better by New Jersey’s college students, and make college more affordable in the Garden State.