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Patricia J. Morokoff/Jerome A. Schaffran: R.I. cannot afford URI cut

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PATRICIA J. MOROKOFF JEROME A. SCHAFFRAN

WHEN THE WIND blows some people build walls and some people build windmills.” Here in Rhode Island, we certainly know the wind is blowing: We have the highest unemployment rate in America and a difficult business climate.

But building a wall won’t help. Rather, the creative energy that builds a windmill and meets the future head on will bring us a better tomorrow.

The desire for a better tomorrow leads Rhode Islanders to seek higher education at their state university, the University of Rhode Island. Twenty percent of all Rhode Island residents with a four-year college degree graduated from URI. This means that all around the state, people obtained the education they needed for the jobs they hold by attending URI. Pharmacists, teachers, nurses, engineers, speech pathologists, fashion designers, CEOs, psychologists, and journalists got their start at URI.

In fact, for the past century, Rhode Islanders have depended on their state university to be there to open economic doors for themselves and their children. But what if we didn’t have a state university to provide a quality education at in-state rates? What if URI became the equivalent of a private university primarily serving non-Rhode Islanders?

Up to now, state funding has allowed the University to keep tuition and fee costs for Rhode Island citizens (\$8,678 per year) lower than those for out-of-state students, who pay the cost of education (\$24,776). URI’s in-state tuition continues to be the lowest of the New England universities. But state funding has fallen from over 50 percent of URI’s annual budget in 1971 to 11 percent for 2009.

To survive additional cuts in state funding, the university will be forced to either enroll many more out-of-state students, reducing space for Rhode Island students, or increase the tuition to in-state students to the real cost of a URI education — the tuition that out-of-state students pay. Either approach would reduce the ability of Rhode Islanders to attend their state university. We believe this reduced ability will have many unintended consequences that may diminish the state’s economic wellbeing for many generations to come.

Labor economist Paul Harrington recently told Governor Carcieri’s forum on Rhode Island’s ailing economy, “Education is our pathway to economic prosperity.” He stressed: “Improving public education to make the state’s labor force more attractive to businesses is a must.”

A better-educated citizenry has a direct impact on a state’s economy and quality of life. A college-educated workforce creates pivotal benefits for the state. Individuals with higher degrees can expect to earn higher incomes, which result in more tax revenues and economic activity for

the state (\$38,500 more than individuals with only a high school diploma). An educated, skilled population also makes fewer demands on social services and makes more informed health and lifestyle choices that result in state savings in public resources.

The most direct and reliable way of achieving these goals is to maintain a high-quality education system that helps the greatest proportion of the state's residents earn a college degree. The University of Rhode Island is the state's most promising resource toward long-term economic prosperity, both for the state and its citizens.

The January 2009 issue of SmartMoney magazine, examining the ratio of salaries earned by alumni to up-front tuition costs, ranks the University of Rhode Island 15th in a nationwide study of public and private colleges. In what they call a "new twist on traditional college rankings," they assessed schools on their ability to deliver the best return on investment and sought to quantify the long-term value of a college education. According to their assessment, URI is the highest ranked institution in New England, followed by the University of Massachusetts at 18 and the University of New Hampshire at 23. Harvard is ranked 25th and Brown 35th.

While this is good news for URI graduates, it doesn't change the fact that further budget cuts and higher in-state tuition will reduce the ability of many Rhode Islanders to attend their public university. Of the overall state budget, the amount appropriated to URI has shrunk from 8 percent in 1971 to 2 percent in 2009. This Rhode Island resource is clearly endangered.

With the wind blowing, certainly every state dollar must be well justified. But a state dollar spent on URI preserves this economic engine for the state and the right of access to a university education for Rhode Islanders. The true cost of cutting off state support to the university may be more than we can afford.

All Rhode Islanders benefit from a public higher-education system, whether or not they or their children attend our colleges and universities. Having college-educated citizens is one of the most important economic drivers for any state. Therefore, this issue should be of great concern to all Rhode Island families, government leaders, and businesses.

URI is our institution. When the wind blows, some people build windmills. The university is our way to create energy and prosperity during this economic windstorm. At a time when "cut" is the word of the day, this is one cut Rhode Island cannot afford.

Patricia J. Morokoff is chairwoman of Psychology Department at the University of Rhode Island, where Jerome A. Schaffran is professor emeritus of human development and family studies. They are co-chairs of the URI Equity Council. The following individuals endorsed this piece: Celeste Martin, Faculty Senate president, on behalf of the 2008-09 Faculty Senate; Tom Ahrens, Student Senate president on behalf of the 2008-09 Student Senate, and Gary Kulberg, president of the 2008-09 URI Alumni Association Executive