



Column: Top-ranked universities drive Florida's economy

By W. Kent Fuchs and John Thrasher

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The Florida Gators and the Florida State Seminoles have one of the strongest rivalries in the country. It takes an important cause to bring us together. We write as the presidents of these universities to share our common mission and invite you to join the cause — to make Florida the top national destination to learn, create, work and live.

Thanks to the visionary and ongoing support particularly of Senate President Joe Negron, Speaker Richard Corcoran and Gov. Rick Scott, Florida is beginning to realize the benefit of recent investment in our universities. Last month, *U.S. News & World Report* declared Florida the best state in the nation for higher education based on value and performance. Our two pre-eminent universities are ranked 14th and 38th among public universities. We are on the rise, but we can do so much more.

Right now, in the Florida Legislature, there is a debate about the future of higher education. Should we take our universities to the next level by investing the resources needed to create top-tier universities? Do we need to hit the brakes because good is good enough? The answer to these questions reaches far beyond the college campuses and affects the life of every Floridian.

We know there is a direct correlation between the prosperity of a state and the quality of its higher education institutions. We contribute by:

- **RESEARCH**, such as the groundbreaking work FSU and UF are doing to treat and control Zika. Together, Florida institutions have more than \$2.1 billion in research expenditures.
- **TEACHING**, by preparing the state's workforce for the jobs of the future in an incredibly competitive, global economy. And it's not just for students from wealthy families. Florida is a national leader in successfully supporting students from all backgrounds.
- **SERVICE**, partnering with businesses and communities, to share knowledge, resources and expertise. Private companies licensing technology from UF infused nearly \$2.3 billion into the state of Florida economy in 2015 and accounted for the employment of more than 10,600 people. FSU's medical school has generated over \$1 billion in statewide socioeconomic impact through its regional clinical campuses that employ more than 2,300 clinical faculty who teach students and provide medical care for countless patients in rural and underserved populations throughout Florida.

We are doing great work, but we can and should do more. Nationally, Florida universities are far behind our peers in several key areas, which is holding us back from realizing the full potential of our universities. We don't have enough faculty to advise and teach students, and we need to increase research funding, attract nationally recognized faculty and improve compensation for graduate students.

Targeted investment by the state — in performance funding, pre-eminence funding, the World Class Faculty Scholar program, the Professional and Graduate Degree Excellence program, student scholarships and university physical infrastructure — will show the national higher education community that the state of Florida is committed to providing high quality education, research and public service to the state and nation.

So we must continue our efforts because as we all know the existing top institutions in the rest of the country aren't standing still.

All of which brings us back to the original question: Why should having top-ranked universities matter?

Very simply, because it is a reflection of the entire state and its people.

A state with top-ranked universities stands as a beacon signaling to the rest of the country that it values progress, values knowledge and values economic growth and opportunity.

Tourism, real estate and agriculture drive our state's economy. Florida has long sought to add a fourth leg to this stool, and Florida's research universities have been partners in this effort by joining local and state governments in building our growing technology economy.

Having top-ranked universities also signals this is a state that values the future — not just its own but that of the entire nation, and it wishes to contribute to that future in meaningful ways.

Perhaps most important, having top-ranked universities signals that this is a state that values its young people enough to give them the best shot possible at a bright future without having to go elsewhere to find it.

That alone is a goal worth reaching.

As all of our research universities reach the next level of excellence, we will transform the state together, helping Florida to rise as a leader in commerce, in culture and in international stature.

We may be rivals on the football field, but we stand united in doing all we can to continue to improve our state.

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