Fifty years ago this week, President Lyndon Johnson signed the first Higher Education Act. On that occasion, he said, "this act means the path of knowledge is open to all that have the determination to walk it." He added, "this nation can never make a wiser or a more profitable investment anywhere." His words are as relevant today as they were 50 years ago.

In New York, SUNY and its 64 campuses are delivering on the spirit of that groundbreaking legislation. We now ask our state leaders to stand with SUNY. SUNY campuses serve more than 460,000 students and are huge economic drivers for the state, generating $21 billion annually. New Paltz alone provides a high-quality public education to nearly 8,000 students, contributes several hundred million dollars in economic activity to the Hudson Valley, and is your public university in the region. And much like other SUNY institutions, we have connections with surrounding counties. We enrolled 800 Dutchess County students last year, about 180 of our employees are county residents, and our direct spending in the county is close to $7 million annually.

These facts underline the educational and economic value of New Paltz and other SUNYs in New York. The fiscal conditions of the state have improved greatly since the economic downturn of the great recession and its aftermath, all while SUNY has increased our positive impact with very limited state resources. As we continue to improve, it's now time to stand with SUNY and increase state tax support for this great public higher education system.

The state legislature passed in 2011 groundbreaking legislation that allowed campuses to establish clear, predictable tuition increases. Before that, students could not forecast tuition. It would remain flat for several years, then increase by double-digit percentages in a single year. The situation was untenable for those who enrolled during that double-digit jump.

Since 2011, SUNY campuses have invested in student success. Tuition revenue has been re-invested to promote access, completion and success, including for the state’s highest-need students. SUNY New Paltz has added 45 new full-time faculty positions, and key student support staff, such as a veteran’s services coordinator. A new transfer student coordinator serves the many students from the surrounding community colleges. Such investments have expanded course offerings to support timely graduation, and kept class sizes small to allow close interaction between students and professors. We have increased student financial aid, helping keep student loan debt of New Paltz graduates below the national average. These investments make a high-quality public education possible for our students.

But our students need the state to partner with them and their families further to take these offerings to scale. Even though tuition costs in SUNY are in the bottom quartile of such costs across the nation, too many New York young people cannot afford a higher education. As predictable tuition is increased, it's time for the state to step up its game with increasing state tax support if New York is to remain competitive and serve our students well.

Last year, the state budget included a first-of-its-kind $18 million investment of direct tax support to provide new resources for student success and degree completion. This was an excellent first step and we're encouraged with the prospect of additional support to build on student success at New Paltz and other SUNY campuses.

Our students continue to do great things and we want to provide them with the resources and latitude to continue to succeed. SUNY has a tremendous impact on New York and the improving economy warrants increasing state tax support for the state's students, along with continuation of a rational tuition policy.

New Paltz and other public institutions take their educational and economic mission and generated benefits seriously, and we look forward to state officials and the general public joining us in our important mission.

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