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Protect the grants
Higher ed is a worthy investment

The value of a college education is undeniable in terms of greater earning potential for graduates. But the state gets an outstanding return on its investment as well because successful students become greater contributors to the communities in which they live and work."

If that sounds like the philosophy of any university president you know around this college town, you might be surprised to learn that it's the opinion of the president of a nonprofit private college in North Miami, Johnson & Wales. That's just one of Florida's hundreds of private for-profit as well as nonprofit independent colleges and universities that, contrary to another popular opinion, do not specialize in educating the children of the wealthy, but are increasingly providing close-to-home university classes for minorities and families earning less than a modest \$60,000 a year.

This year, the role of these nonpublic institutions of higher learning is big, in large part because the state universities are having to limit their enrollment, double class sizes and otherwise cut back on offerings because of the state's financial crisis. They've been underfunded for about five years in terms growth, with more and more students knocking at the door, holding Bright Futures scholarships in hand each year. Finally, the universities are saying they can't squeeze in any more — not and expect to graduate current students on time. And this build-up of trouble is exacerbated by the demand this spring that the State University System reduces its budget by \$48.6 million. That's an estimated \$6.5 million less at Florida State and \$2.2 million less at Florida A&M.

But the independents are hurting, too, because the governor's proposed budget devastates a tuition-assistance program called Florida Resident Access Grants (FRAG) that the state provides to full-time undergraduate students at the 28 Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida that produce about one-third of all college degrees in the state.

The FRAG grants, about \$3,000 a year, are at risk of being cut in half.

Also at risk are Access to Better Learning and Education (ABLE) grants (about \$1,250 a year), which help fund mostly lower-income students who are enrolled in both diploma and degree-granting programs in myriad areas in some of the 200 institutions in the Florida Association of Postsecondary Schools and Colleges.

These relatively small grants provide the state with a huge return on its investment — in part because these students are not otherwise using taxpayer dollars that support the public universities.

It's imperative that lawmakers, when confronting what are unquestionably complex budget problems, make careful distinctions between stopping programs to reduce waste or duplication, and cutting expenditures that are true investments, from which nothing but a positive payback can be expected.