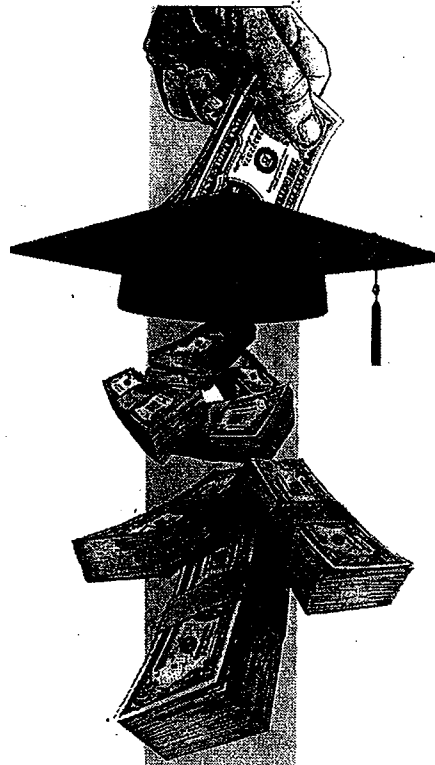


On RIT
Site

If N.Y. invests in student aid, economy will reap dividends



ALBERT J. SIMONE
and **KATHERINE KEOUGH**
GUEST ESSAYISTS



File illustration

In the past few months, the Rochester area has been buffeted with news about additional layoffs and downsizing at several of our major companies. Though the Rochester region will continue to absorb some of the impact of job losses in larger firms — as many of these talented workers are snapped up by emerging small and medium-size companies — the economic health and stability of the community must rely on other assets as well. Among these assets are the colleges and universities in this region.

The Rochester community is not alone in feeling the impact of the lagging economy. A recent Zogby International poll found that nearly half of respondents (47 percent) think that the state's economy is in serious trouble, while just 3 percent feel there are no major problems facing New York state.

The poll was commissioned by the Albany-based Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities (CICU), an association that represents New York's private, nonprofit higher education institutions.

With the economy a major concern, upstate regions such as Rochester and Monroe County are justified in wondering, "What's next?" While we cannot predict the future, we can take proactive steps to shape it, particularly by investing in and celebrating our strengths and by working together on a set of selected priorities.

The Greater Rochester Enterprise and the "Made for Living" marketing effort are two positive developments in this regard. As the GRE strategic plan gets under way, it will focus on the assets our region has to offer companies in the new economy. Quality-of-life issues are certainly among this region's

strengths, but what companies will be looking for first and foremost are the knowledgeable workers they require to be economically viable. Therefore, we suggest that higher education will be among the key drivers of Rochester's new economy.

In this regard, Rochester has a distinct advantage. Our regional work force is second to none in terms of the education and skills needed by these companies. The "Made for Living" campaign highlights the fact that nearly 80,000 students attend colleges in this area. These colleges graduate more than 10,500 people per year, many of whom stay in the area, and more will do so as career opportunities grow through the efforts of GRE and its partners.

A marketing analysis commissioned by GRE validated the fact that higher education is one of the key strengths of the Rochester region. We are, in fact, a "college town" — a characterization

that we should proclaim with pride.

Why is this such an important asset? According to the Zogby poll results, New Yorkers believe that:

- Education and the economy are the two most important issues facing New York state.

- The presence of local colleges and universities is critical to the community's economic well-being.

- Colleges and universities have a positive effect on an educated work force.

Six in 10 of those polled also viewed state funding for higher education as equally important to state support for K-12 education, and more than half believe that New York should do more to help middle-income families pay for college.

A similar percentage favor giving state dollars directly to students with financial need, enabling them to choose the college which best meets their needs.

New York's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), which provides state-funded financial aid to students based on family income, is an important piece of the state's investment in higher education and in its future work force.

In the Rochester region alone, TAP brings more than \$38 million to students at our public and independent colleges and universities. Most of these students also work part time, and assume significant student loans.

New York state is investing significant funding in high-tech projects and university research programs, also aimed at securing the state's economic future. These investments are critical, but the work force needed to populate the new industries that will grow from these investments cannot be overlooked. The TAP program is a key factor in building that work force, and in preparing for our future economic recovery.

Now more than ever, it is essential for our citizens to be competitive in the workplace, and higher education is their passport to future success. □

Simone is president of the Rochester Institute of Technology. Keough is president of St. John Fisher College.