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By Karen Lee

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What is the best investment one can make for one's own future and the future of our state?

Invest in education beyond high school.

Not everyone will attend college, but having a post-secondary education — a two- or four-year college degree or industry certificate in a specialized field — provides for the best opportunity at jobs that have a ladder of success.

Hawaii P-20 Partnerships for Education (P-20), a statewide partnership of the Hawaii Department of Education, the University of Hawaii system and the Executive Office on Early Learning, seeks to increase college attainment among working-age adults (25-64) in Hawaii.

This is an urgent matter. By the year 2020, at least 70 percent of jobs in Hawaii will require some college, according to the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. Currently, only 44.3 percent of Hawaii's working age adults (ages 25-64) hold a two- or four-year college degree, which means we need more Hawaii residents with post-secondary training, credentials and degrees to fill those jobs.

Job and critical thinking skills attained in education beyond high school are the key to a living wage in Hawaii — one that can sustain a family.



Karen Lee is executive director of Hawaii P-20 Partnerships for Education.

Nearly 4 out of 5 jobs destroyed by the recession nationally were held by workers with a high school diploma or less.

Those without a college degree are three times more likely to live in poverty than college graduates, and eight times more likely to depend on public assistance.

A college education offers choices, opportunities and security beyond what just a high school diploma will allow.

Job-skills development beyond high school for some can be an industry-recognized certificate or apprenticeship program in a specialized skill.

For others, it can be a two- or four-year degree from a college or university.

These days, people rarely remain in one job for their entire life, so it's all about staying competitive and attaining further skills training to meet the rapidly changing economy.

Are graduates from Hawaii competitive in our global economy? Are we competitive and ready for jobs that recruit from beyond these islands? Are our next generations competitive for those jobs of the future in emerging technologies?

Having a college degree today positions an adult to be ready for new and promising job opportunities.

Furthermore, as one's level of educational attainment increases, median wages increase and unemployment rates decrease.

Hawaii residents with bachelor's degrees earn on average \$27,000 more per year than residents with only a high school diploma, and are less than half as likely to be unemployed, even during a recession, according to U.S. Census data.

While we are currently trying to raise awareness on this issue starting with our youngest keiki on up, we have seen promising momentum that we hope to build upon. College enrollment is increasing among high school graduates: 56 percent of the state Department of Education's Class of 2014 graduates enrolled in college — a 2 percentage point increase from the previous year and a 6 percentage point increase from 2010. And we've seen better preparation by high school graduates for college-level course work in mathematics and English.

Also, the UH system has increased its number of graduates by 36 percent over the past five years — from 8,291 in 2010, to 11,278 in 2014.

Higher levels of education benefit not only our state and local economy, but also individual residents who get and keep family-sustaining jobs. Hawaii P-20 and its partners have established a goal for 55 percent of Hawaii's working-age adults to have a two- or four-year college degree by the year 2025. We have a symbolic online pledge to raise awareness of the campaign at <http://www.55by25.org/action/pledge/>.

By pledging support, we can create a local community that values education and a healthy, vibrant future for Hawaii.

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