Budget cuts imperil higher ed

Before Florida can get a return on its "intellectual capital," it has to invest in it first. Yet the Legislature is refusing to invest. Across the state, business leaders have been making a welcome push to link Florida's future competitiveness with the strength of its colleges and universities. But lawmakers, as they begin final negotiations today on a 2009-10 state budget, threaten to do even more harm to the state's higher education system. House and Senate leaders must find more money for higher education, and business leaders need to demand it.

Proposed tuition increases that would raise roughly $50 million cannot begin to make up for the woefully inadequate budgets under consideration in the Senate and House. The Senate version is bad, but the House version is worse, spending $460 million less than the bare-to-the-bone Senate plan.

Under the Senate version, which would budget $3.5 billion for state universities and community colleges, the University of Florida would lose $50 million from its base budget. The University of South Florida would lose $38 million. In each case, the House plan is far more miserly. USF, for example, would lose $78 million if the House has its way. To put that in context: That's more than the entire budget of the university's liberal arts college — which has 14,000 students.

These are no longer abstract numbers. Programs will die. A few days ago, Florida State University, anticipating a $73 million cut, released a list of programs it expects to eliminate if the situation does not improve. These are not mere layoffs or reductions. Entire degree programs — 21 of them — would disappear, including: anthropology, geological sciences, molecular biophysics, oceanography, geography, behavioral psychology, software engineering, German and Slavic languages, to name just a few. Hardly the stuff of fluff.

Florida State, UF and USF combined to bring in research grants and contracts worth more than $1 billion last year. Such money helps to finance breakthroughs that make life better for everyone.

But already the universities are losing faculty to other universities in this country and abroad. Some of those professors are the very ones who helped to attract research money to Florida schools. Now with federal stimulus money and grants flooding out to research institutions, Florida is at a growing disadvantage at the very time it needs to be more competitive than ever. The state's failure to spend money is costing it both intellectual capital and actual research dollars.

Unlike the stock market, an investment in education will always yield a good return. But without an investment, there can be no return at all. A state that refuses to spend on higher education will get the work force it deserves, a citizenry uneducated and unequipped to compete in the global economy of the 21st century.