

Opinion: N.J. colleges get vote of confidence with \$750M construction referendum

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New Jersey's colleges and universities and its citizens have something to celebrate: last month's [approval of the "Building for the Future" higher education \\$750 million bond](#) by nearly a 2-1 vote. It is the first general obligation bond to support new academic facilities since 1988.

Legislative leaders such as Senate President Sweeney, Speaker Sheila Oliver, Senate Minority Leader Thomas Kean, Assembly Majority Leader Louis Greenwald and Gov. Christie should be congratulated for passing legislation to put the bond on the ballot. University, labor and business leaders should feel good about building a coalition to support passage of the bond, which received national attention.

But this victory is about more than building new facilities. The vote in favor of the bond, especially in this difficult economy, was a big vote of confidence in the importance of our colleges.

College leaders and boards of trustees should use the bond win as a means to engage citizens about the value of college in New Jersey, and to ask citizens who strongly support college opportunity to help colleges meet policy reform challenges to keep higher education strong now and in the future. College leaders would make a big mistake to use the victory simply to ask the state for more money. The state's public colleges are primarily funded by tuition and fees, not by the state. They deserve greater investment to achieve the state's educational and economic growth goals, but more state funding will come only if higher education is viewed as a high priority by the state's citizens and policy makers.

Accordingly, the big issue for our colleges is a continuing effort to strengthen public trust and using that trust to tackle needed educational and business reforms to keep colleges high on the public agenda, where they compete for attention with other important issues such as K-12 education, health, taxes, transportation, the environment and more.

No single college or university can accomplish this goal alone. They all have to work together, as they did on the bond. College leaders and governing boards will have to do more outside of the bounds of leading and managing particular colleges to make a transparent case, not only about the promise that college holds for New Jersey's future prosperity, but also to engage the public in a candid conversation about the challenges of college affordability, productivity and degree completion. The case should stress how higher education aligns with the larger public agenda regarding social equity, jobs, economic prosperity, global competitiveness and individual liberty in the Garden State.

Some needed reforms include: reducing students' time to graduation by eliminating unnecessary credits, streamlining academic programs and extending the academic year; testing and granting credit for practical learning outside of college; stronger partnerships with business, labor, schools and other colleges; and re-examination of tuition policy and student financial aid — all for the purpose of reducing pressure to raise tuition and strengthening student retention and graduation. State law and policy that regulate budgeting, personnel, purchasing and contracting need reform, too. These reforms will lead to greater college access, affordability and public accountability for college effectiveness.

Involving citizens to share responsibility for change will generate stronger public trust, more pol