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A generous donation, a timely challenge

For years, private dollars from the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation have helped set the course for public funding of education in Idaho. Future high school graduates - and their parents - can only hope the foundation will start another trend.

The foundation has put \$11 million into scholarships for Idaho college students. Spread equally among 11 two- and four-year schools, these donations will only do so much and only help so many students.

But if the foundation's money becomes a challenge grant of sorts, an inspiration to private and public donors, then this could be the start of something bigger. Something that pays dividends that outlast an \$11 million investment. A big step to address a chronic Idaho problem.

The state's college attendance rates historically rank among the lowest in the nation. In 2007, only 34 percent of Idahoans over age 25 held a post-secondary degree.

The reasons are varied. Some high school grads head into the workplace, and never pursue a degree. Some students never consider college simply because their parents never attended college. Wisely, the foundation wants colleges to award some scholarship money to at-risk students, such as first-generation college students and non-traditional students returning to school.

Recognizing the need to prepare Idahoans for a high-tech workplace, the foundation also wants to reward high school graduates who have strong math and science backgrounds.

The \$11 million in scholarships couldn't come at a better time, when recession-driven policy decisions are actually putting a college education further out of reach. State budget cuts mean higher student fees and fewer offerings of basic required courses - a double whammy that makes a degree more expensive for students and parents. Lawmakers have put \$20 million into a scholarship endowment, but that amount falls far short of Gov. Butch Otter's original dream, laid out early in his term, of a \$100 million endowment.

The foundation's dollars do not eliminate the need to grow a public scholarship endowment. Nor do they take other private contributors off the hook. Meeting Idaho's demand for need-based scholarships will require a collaborative effort.

By supporting scholarships - and putting a separate \$6 million into the Idaho Education Network, a broadband education program that could help Idaho students better prepare for college - the Albertson foundation is making a powerful statement about investing in education, even during tough times.

Will the state step up to the challenge? Will other private donors?