Until the bubble in our housing market burst in 2006, and our economy went into a tailspin, young people without a degree could earn a decent living in Nevada. Casinos and construction offered relatively well-paying jobs for these workers. So perhaps it made some sense that Nevada consistently ranked at the bottom in high school graduation rates and the percentage of residents with a college degree. Perhaps we have simply had less demand for education.

But there is also a supply side. According to the Census Bureau, in 2006 Nevada had the fewest number of employees working in public education of any state, relative to population. In public K-12, we had 25 percent fewer employees than the national average. In public higher education, Nevada had a third fewer employees per capita than the national average, even though we rely much less than most other states on private colleges.

How do we compare to our neighbors to the west and the east? We compete with California for students, and the prices Californians pay for things significantly impact us here. But Utah is also a good comparison because it has a population that is only slightly larger than ours, and faces many of the same geographic challenges as Nevada. Utah is also not as wealthy as Nevada or California.

It is no surprise that Nevada has significantly fewer employees in public education than California or Utah. What is surprising is that Utah has more than twice as many people working in public higher education than Nevada, even though Utah also has private universities such as BYU. Utah has put many more resources into higher education, and a much larger share of Utahans have college degrees.

Things have gotten much worse for Nevada since 2006. The state’s economy has been the worst performer in the nation, and the state’s tax revenues have declined much more than our state’s economy. Higher education has taken a disproportionate share of this budget hit.

The Nevada System of Higher Education has lost a fifth of its state-funded operating budget in the last two years. At UNR, we have 350 fewer employees, we shut down programs and we fired productive faculty, even as our number of students has grown. We now have the largest and best-prepared freshman class in our history, and more of our students are graduating than any time in recent memory, but if more cuts come we will be hard pressed to keep serving them.

The state economies that are now recovering fastest are those with a more educated workforce. If we ever hope that we will be able to reinvent our economy in the future, we need to be able to educate our students, and we need to maintain a higher education system that will attract our best students to stay here, not chase them off to other states.

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