

# The Kingston Whig-Standard

## Invest in community colleges; LETTER;

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As governments around the world scramble to contain the economic meltdown, the preferred tool everywhere seems to be accelerated infrastructure spending.

In the U. S., President Barack Obama has promised massive infrastructure spending on everything from roads to schools as a way to kick-start a dormant economy. Obama's plan is designed to create jobs and leave behind a lasting legacy that will enhance America's competitiveness and quality of life.

In Canada, we've taken a less ambitious approach. Up to now, the debate has mostly been about whether investments in traditional infrastructure - such as water and wastewater treatment, roads and transit - would see these projects start soon enough to actually fight the recession.

But as important as those investments may be, there is another kind of public infrastructure that is desperately in need of attention. It has projects ready to go yet has largely been ignored in this debate. It is Canada's colleges and institutes.

With campuses in 1,000 rural and urban communities, Canada's colleges are rooted in their local economies, responding quickly to new technologies, opportunities and business needs. As evidence of this, more than 90% of college graduates obtain employment in their field within six months of graduating, even in today's slowing economy.

Unfortunately, many colleges are also operating at capacity. It can take years to get into some programs, with qualified applicants far outnumbering available spaces. Equipment shortages and deferred building maintenance characterize the system.

As our country faces a crisis in advanced skills that is hurting its long-term global competitiveness and productivity, Canada's most important skills trainers are forced to turn students away.

Our colleges badly need an infusion of new capital to help them expand and upgrade their infrastructure and acquire leading-edge technology.

Tomorrow's federal budget presents a unique opportunity to tackle this deficit. A recent survey of Canadian community colleges shows that dozens of upgrade and expansion projects are ready to go if money is available.

Investing in and expanding college capacity would create thousands of jobs today and support training for jobs tomorrow. And it would support the economic recovery by building a more abundant

talent pool for employers.

Making college infrastructure eligible for federal funding would also enhance the government's economic stimulus package. By employing building contractors, it would expand the number of trades benefitting from the stimulus spending and spread employment opportunities to more communities.

The only major national investment in colleges took place in the 1960s, when these institutions were created. Colleges were born out of a national vision and a federal/provincial partnership stimulated by the "boomer" population explosion and the skills requirements of the day.

Now is the time for the Government of Canada to demonstrate that same kind of vision and invest in our prime infrastructure -our human capital.

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