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EDITORIAL

State's future prosperity hinges on education

The numbers provide a stark testimony to the benefits of a college degree: Between 2000 and 2006, Michigan consistently ranked 34th among the 50 states in the number of residents age 25 or older who held a bachelor's degree. Not a statistic to be particularly proud of, but not nearly as disturbing as personal income figures: For that same six-year period, Michigan fell from 16th in the nation for per-capita income to 26th.

In other words, lack of education is making Michigianians poorer compared to Americans overall.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm and other state leaders have been emphasizing the need for a better educated work force to meet the needs of the 21st century, but the new study released Monday by Michigan Future Inc. drives home the point in dollars-and-cents terms.

For much of the 20th century, Michigianians with minimal educations could find secure jobs that allowed them to not only support their families, but lead solid, middle-class lives. The Great Lakes State was a world leader in manufacturing, where many good-paying jobs depended as much on brawn as brain power.

That is no longer true. Jobs that will sustain a middle-class lifestyle in the future largely require a college degree or some kind of specialized training or skills.

Jobs that have no educational requirements won't disappear, but they will decrease. More importantly, such jobs aren't likely to provide the level of pay that can support a family and help build the American dream.

So it is important that we heed the underlying message of the Michigan Future Inc. study and encourage our young people to get the education they will need to lead happy, prosperous lives.

But Michigan also faces an economic Catch-22: The state needs a well-educated work force to attract employers in a knowledge-based economy. Yet too many young people who currently are earning college degrees in Michigan are forced to leave the state to find employment.

How do we stop the so-called "brain drain" and create jobs in information technology, finance, insurance, health care, technical services and other professions that will keep college graduates here?

That is the challenge Michigan faces if it wants a prosperous future. But there is no debate that higher education must play a vital role in that future.
