We are at the cusp of historic growth in our region, due in part to Tesla's announcement, but even more so as a result of the more than 100 new companies that have relocated to the region over the past few years. Add to this, the scores of additional companies (advanced manufacturing, data centers, logistics and technology) we are working with; many that have already decided to come here, as well as the numerous local companies that are expanding. The projections are staggering! More than 50,000 new jobs are expected to be added to this region in the next five years. However, if we are going to meet this looming workforce development challenge, we must upgrade our existing workforce talent and our community colleges are the only way to address this surging demand. Yet we seem to have forgotten them, underfunded them, and generally underappreciate them – They have become the Rodney Dangerfield of our higher education system.

Our Community Colleges could be saying, “I get no respect” like Rodney Dangerfield did. Although to be accurate, there is only one Community College left in the state, Truckee Meadows Community College; the rest have changed their names to eliminate “Community”. They are all “Colleges” trying desperately to compete on the same level as our universities by adding four years degree programs. This name change is their attempt to fight for funding and respect in a system of higher education that is exclusively run by university graduates. Yes, even the leadership in our Community Colleges have undergraduate, masters and doctorate degrees and their kids will certainly get a four year degree because that is what they value.

With our overwhelming belief that a college degree is the key to success, we fail to acknowledge that 74% of our Nevada kids will never get a four year degree. So while we focus on the 26%, talk about college ready, and fund the path to success for that 26%, we leave behind, or generally label as unsuccessful, the other 74% - the vast majority of our youth.

What we value is what we fund. We recently passed legislation to increase funding for K-12 education and have increased funding to our universities, both overdue and critical to our economic diversification efforts. But why has the Community College funding in Northern Nevada plummeted (down 25% in the past 6 years) at a time when the demand for this workforce related, technical skill training has skyrocketed? Those 100 new companies mentioned above need skilled employees, not four year degree liberal arts majors. 80% of the new jobs in the region require employees with technical skills or certifications, not a four year degree. By the way, those advanced manufacturing jobs (half of our new companies) pay more than $60,000 a year and those jobs are available right now, here in Reno-Sparks.

In the long term, the workforce development rests in large part with our K-12 education system. Increasing the high school graduation rate and adding an emphasis on STEM or STEAM, if you add the Arts, is imperative. However, a two year degree or a certification
is also needed if the next generation wants access to the quality jobs that are coming to the state.

Our community has worked very hard to attract quality companies to the region with a focus on advanced manufacturing and technology. The addition of Tesla, and almost 50 other manufacturing companies, has moved us a long way toward becoming the "advanced manufacturing hub of the West". In addition to manufacturing, we are a developing technology center (with data center additions like Apple and Switch) and reinforcing our place as the Western Regional logistics hub. To continue this success we must now focus on the development of our workforce.

This growing demand for skilled labor compels us to value our community colleges and the path they pave to great jobs and incredible opportunity. We must ensure that our community colleges are adequately funded to truly “develop” the workforce of the future. We also need to value the jobs that are growing in our region, acknowledge that most can be filled with community college training, and prepare and even encourage our kids to take advantage of these great job opportunities right here in our state. It is unprecedented in our history to have so many quality jobs waiting for graduates with the necessary skills. This exciting growth will only continue if we enable our Community Colleges to meet the needs of our current and future employers.