With the deepest recession since the 1930s, the decline in tax revenues, and the growing demand for emergency public services for unemployed workers and their families, state government budgets are in crisis.

Not surprisingly, many states are freezing or even cutting their funding for some of the greatest assets of the American education system — our public land grant universities.

All across the country, state universities are being forced to raise tuitions, cut faculty positions or rely on part-timers, and curtail courses of study and research programs. While these cutbacks may help to balance budgets in the short-term, the nation will pay dearly for years to come as our workers’ skills, our scientific know-how, and our progress on urgent priorities, from food safety to childhood obesity and renewable energy all will be sacrificed for the sake of avoiding tough choices here and now.

Public land grant universities serve at least five essential functions: educating a cross-section of young Americans; conducting essential research in science and technological; engaging in "extension" (or outreach) efforts to the agriculture and food industries; and addressing urgent issues, such as improving children’s nutrition and controlling climate change.

With their core mission of education, the land grant universities’ contribution is unequaled. The top 10 public universities alone teach more than 350,000 undergraduate students — more than six times the total enrollments of the Ivy League institutions. Moreover, public universities are much more affordable and accessible for students from middle class and low income families — the great majority of the population.

When it comes to cutting-edge scientific and technological research, state universities are second to none. Some of this research is focused on the land grants’ founding purpose of promoting agricultural know-how in the widest sense: finding new, better, and more sustainable ways to produce and use food, fuel and other necessities.

Far from being ivory towers, the land grant universities are dedicated to sharing this knowledge with all who need it. Through the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s extension programs, the land grant universities disseminate state-of-the-art scientific and technological advances to the nation’s farmers, the food industry, the restaurant industry, nutritionists, educators, and others who can make good use of this know-how.

The creation of new knowledge and new understanding through research is at the very soul of our land-grant universities. The day we abandon the search for new knowledge is the day we cease to be effective universities.

On many of the nation’s most pressing challenges, the land grant universities are on the frontiers of discovering, developing, and disseminating important ideas. New ways to combat childhood obesity, to develop renewable fuels, and to reduce and respond to climate change are being devised by the land grant universities and shared by the extension programs.

But the USDA’s research and education program receives only about $1 billion a year, a small share of total federal funding for research and development. Meanwhile, in their states, the land grant universities are on the budgetary chopping blocks.
It’s time that the president and Congress provided the necessary resources through the annual appropriations process for the universities that are teaching the students and conducting the research to replenish the nation’s skills and know-how. Shortchanging the land grant universities gives America’s future short shrift. Every federal dollar dedicated to land grant universities represents a tremendous return on investment because of our commitment to fully link research and teaching and extension with the great expectations of our citizens.

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