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Healthcare Benefits for Community College Faculty & Staff Should be a Priority for 81st Legislature

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Every year more than one million students pass through the doors of Texas community colleges in search of their dreams. Some students embark on a journey toward earning a bachelors degree, while others seek to acquire the workforce skills needed to help grow the state's economy. As the fastest growing sector of higher education the future of Texas relies greatly on the success of community colleges.

Today, in the midst of nationwide economic troubles, the role of community colleges has never been more significant. According to State Comptroller Susan Combs an increase of 10,000 students in community college enrollments would add 13,000 jobs to the Texas economy within one year. Our institutions are well positioned to provide solutions for the workforce and economic growth needs of the state.

Texas community colleges have been doing their part to bring these educational opportunities to Texans. Over the past seven years, community college enrollments have risen by more than 31%, adding nearly 140,000 new students (the equivalent of nearly three Universities of Texas at Austin or five Texas Tech Universities). Despite this enormous growth in our enrollments, community colleges have worked hard to keep student costs low. Over the past ten years community college students have seen on average only a 2.6% annual increase in tuition & fees statewide.

Community Colleges have operated with the understanding that a partnership exists between local colleges and the state. Under this compact, the state promised local communities it would fund the instructional costs for community colleges if local residents would tax themselves to build and maintain necessary the physical facilities. In this partnership, the state historically funded community college employee healthcare insurance based on an employee's job function – teaching and

serving our students. With this partnership the state's 50 community college districts have flourished.

However, the state's historical commitment to this agreement has been shrinking. Over the years – good economic times and bad – the community college state formula has continued to be largely underfunded. Because of this, community colleges have been forced to use student tuition and local tax dollars to fill the growing state funding gap. Some contend that now the state should only pay part of the health insurance costs of our faculty and staff.

The argument for the state paying only a proportional share is based on the notion of linking employee health insurance funding to the level state formula funding. By tying the funding of these critical employee insurance benefits to the amount of state formula funding our colleges will be penalized for shouldering costs, which are the state's responsibility. This will result in an even greater financial burden being placed on students and local communities.

The historical partnership between the state and community colleges needs to be renewed. An essential step toward accomplishing this is for the 81st Legislature to honor its commitment to community college employees by passing Senate Bill 41 by Senator Judith Zaffirini. With passage of this bill, community colleges will be better equipped to hire and retain talented faculty and staff members who are essential components in providing quality educational opportunities for all students.

Community colleges remain committed to their missions of providing excellent educational opportunities for students and as a place where any Texan reach for their dreams. But they need support. The state must continue its commitment of paying group healthcare insurance for community college faculty & staff. Senate Bill 41 would ensure that our colleges can rely on the state to remain our partners in providing solutions for the economic and workforce needs of Texas.