STANDING AT THE EDGE OF THE PRECIPICE

GIVEN THE ENTERTAINMENT THEME OF this issue of College of Charleston Magazine, I thought it appropriate to tell you about a speech I recently gave at the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce Economic Outlook Conference.

The title of the speech – “South Carolina Higher Education: At the Precipice” – played off a line from a remake of the 1951 classic science-fiction movie The Day the Earth Stood Still. The new version stars Keanu Reeves as the movie’s famous alien. The alien is convinced that the human race is oblivious to the damage it is doing to planet Earth. But a scientist tries to convince the alien that humans will change once they recognize that their destructive habits threaten their own existence. The scientist says to the alien: "It's only at the edge of the precipice that we change.”

That quote captures where South Carolina now stands in terms of its lagging financial commitment to higher education. I told the more than 500 conference attendees that higher education in South Carolina is at the precipice. I warned that we must change or risk falling into a downward spiral toward mediocrity.

I have since heard from numerous people in politics, academia and business who share these concerns. They see, as I do, the tremendous potential of the College of Charleston and all of public higher education in South Carolina.

The College possesses many assets, including a student-centered faculty, a stunning natural environment and an historic campus.

On a statewide scale, tremendous promise exists in the collaborations between universities and private industry aimed at spurring innovation, entrepreneurship and a stronger education system. South Carolina is geographically poised to tap the burgeoning economic and transportation corridors that form the sprawling megalopolis anchored by Atlanta and Charlotte.

So it is disheartening to also see South Carolina continue to undervalue and underfund its colleges and universities, despite irrefutable evidence that higher education – when properly supported and valued – can raise economic and social indicators virtually across the board.

South Carolina currently ranks last in the nation for its financial support of higher education over the past 10 years. This long-standing trend puts us at risk of falling so far behind that we'll never catch up to the education systems of neighboring states such as Georgia and North Carolina, which make significantly larger investments in their colleges and universities.

But there is hope. Even in these tough economic times, there is growing recognition that higher education needs more support, not less.

Recently, a study committee of the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education released a report that would, if followed, improve our state's higher education system and grow our economy.

One of the report’s goals is to increase the level of research and innovation. This can be accomplished by significantly enhancing partnerships among all colleges and universities and in collaboration with the private sector.

The committee also recommended steps that would cost the state little or nothing. For example, a bill pending in the South Carolina General Assembly would provide regulatory relief for public higher education institutions. This administrative adjustment could save our colleges and universities money by reducing costly and redundant approvals required to build facilities, hire people and purchase supplies and equipment.

All of the state's public college and university presidents have coalesced around the regulatory issue. And there is support for other recommendations in the report such as increasing workforce training to meet the needs of growing and emerging industries. These strategies are not only in the best interest of our public institutions of higher education, but they are crucial for spurring economic growth in South Carolina.

In The Day the Earth Stood Still the alien was frustrated watching humans act against their self-interest. But I tend to share the optimism of the scientist. While I believe that higher education in South Carolina is at the precipice, I also believe that we can change.

– President P. George Benson

To read the President’s Economic Outlook speech, go to president.cofc.edu.