We are the presidents of two distinctly different universities, both of which have rich traditions in and deep commitments to Nebraska. Both institutions are committed to extending opportunities for higher education to qualified students — regardless of gender, race, ethnicity or national origin.

We believe this is essential not only for the success of our universities but also for our state. Nebraska's future will depend on our ability to attract and retain talented individuals who will work, raise families and contribute to our communities.

We must start at home by ensuring educational access for all Nebraskans, and we must be open to attracting and developing the talents and gifts of all people. Nebraska has always been a place of promise, openness and opportunity. But we believe that Nebraska's ability to continue providing the opportunities necessary to succeed might be threatened by a petition drive being conducted in the state.

While the supporters promote the goal of "ending preferential treatment," which may at first blush sound appealing, we are convinced that the so-called anti-affirmative-action initiative actually would have the effect of limiting opportunities for Nebraskans and the attractiveness and competitiveness of our state.

Nebraska's population is changing significantly. The African-American, Native American, Asian and Latino populations are all growing, and our elementary, middle and high schools reflect that change. Five years ago, the school population in Nebraska was about 10 percent racial and ethnic minority. In 10 years, the school population will be 30 percent minority.

The question is not whether Nebraska will change but how well we will manage the challenges and opportunities that accompany that change.

It is unfortunate that some of our colleges and universities are changing more slowly, because that reveals a disturbing fact: Minority students have much higher high school dropout rates and much lower college-going rates than other students.

The consequences of that phenomenon will be significant — indeed, devastating — and will continue unless we do everything in our power to change the patterns of educational attainment and college-going. Our goal is to increase the college-going rate to benefit the entire state. One important way that both our universities do this is through programs that encourage college participation for underrepresented populations. It is likely that many of these programs would be prohibited if the so-called anti-affirmative-action constitutional amendment were adopted in Nebraska.

In fact, while supporters call the measure "anti-affirmative action," we urge Nebraskans to consider whether it is really "anti-opportunity." The playing field is still not level; extreme pockets of poverty and inequality exist. Special outreach programs help close the gaps.

The proposed amendment seeks to exclude and divide, and it will limit opportunity and access to those who need it most. These programs do not displace qualified students but rather encourage participation.

Unlike some public institutions in California, where seats in the freshman class are limited, Nebraska's public colleges and universities will find a place for every qualified Nebraska high school graduate.

The petition drive — which is almost entirely funded from outside of Nebraska — seems to change our state's constitution. We believe that those who take the time to understand its real purpose and impact will recognize that it does not represent the values of Nebraskans.

The amendment would take control away from Nebraskans to operate their higher-education institutions in the most successful manner possible. Being a private institution with a 17 percent enrollment of minority and international students, Creighton would not be directly affected by the amendment. However, we believe that all institutions in our state would be affected, directly or indirectly.

We should continue to be known for our commitment to fair, equal and fair treatment and opportunity to all people. In addition, there are major educational benefits to our campuses having a diverse faculty, staff and student body, not only in creating a rich educational experience but also in preparing our students for work in a global environment and in educating our state's future teachers, doctors, entrepreneurs and political leaders.

We ask Nebraskans to become educated on this issue. We hope you will share our view that we have an obligation to promote access to higher education and ensure the economic future of our state.