

Opinion: Chipping away at community colleges

By George Skelton, Los Angeles Times

SACRAMENTO – California's community colleges always have been among the best bargains in America. But too often these days that's like saying land's cheap on Mars.

Price doesn't matter much if the product isn't available.

Like a lot of institutions that rely on tax dollars, California's community college system has been hit hard. And that means students suffer.

They're getting less for more.

Gov. Jerry Brown is proposing to increase student fees by \$10 per unit, from \$26 to \$36. That would raise \$110 million to partly offset a \$400-million state funding cut Brown advocates for community colleges, leaving them with \$3.6 billion in state money, a 10% trim.

The governor essentially wants to shift that \$400 million to K-12 schools. They're more popular with the public, and their biggest union – the California Teachers Assn. – is arguably the most powerful lobby in Sacramento.

Brown's political strategy is simple: He's protecting K-12 schools from more whacks for now. But he's warning that K-12 cuts will resume if voters don't approve his proposed extension of temporary tax hikes in June. The teachers union presumably will be highly motivated to help bankroll his ballot campaign if the Legislature allows the special election.

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