

Opinion: Californians have no idea how important public universities are

By Joe Mathews

Californians, I regret to inform you that your diplomas have been held, and you won't be graduating.

You flunked higher education.

Another state budget, accompanied by an 8-month-long controversy over UC demonstrated once again that we Californians don't have a clue about what our public universities mean to the state.



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Because if we did, we wouldn't make them beg us for money to educate more of our children.

Most Californians think that we're all here because of Junípero Serra or the Gold Rush or oil or sunshine or Hollywood. Nope. The biggest force luring people to California over our history has been our abundance of free – or very cheap – high-quality public education. California pioneered such educational access very early – by 1912, Berkeley was already the largest public university in the world. Offering university degrees on the cheap was a great money saver; we stole away some of the smartest people from other states and

countries and had to pay for just four years of their education (a much better deal than paying for K-12 for Californians).

The result of this policy: for most of the 20th century, Californians weren't just better looking than other Americans – we were smarter too, with the highest rate of college graduates.

But, then in the second half of the 20th century, we began to forget what we had. The state locked in lower tax rates and higher spending by ballot initiative, at the expense of public investment in our world-class university system. The universities made it up by adding tuition fees. Today, we Californians still look great – but we're not as smart. We've fallen out of the top 10 of U.S. states by percentage of adults with college degrees.

The public universities have held onto their reputations and found ways to serve more students despite relentless cutting. The UC 10-campus system, a focus of debate this budget season, saw a 30 percent decrease in state funding – and a 20 percent reduction in its cost per student – over the past decade.

But try telling that to voters, legislators or the media, all of who see the universities as greedy and inefficient – even as they've educated more people with less state support. UC and CSU have fought cuts by appealing to reason and making funding deals with politicians. But reason and politicians are not to be trusted in California, especially when recessions shrink state revenues.

Instead, UC has come to rely on charging out-of-state students huge tuition fees. (\$38,000 compared to \$14,000 for in-state students). The justification is that such fees subsidize about 9,000 California students whose enrollment is not funded by the state. In one disgraceful legislative hearing this spring, lawmakers actually complained that out-of-state students

eligible for financial aid were in fact receiving that aid. Yes, you read that right. The Legislature doesn't want poor kids coming to UC from out of state.

Since the state has a demonstrated need for more educated workers (we'll be short by 1 million by 2025, according to a much-cited report), we should be building on our historic lead and rapidly expanding our universities. But today's California is so small-minded and budget-obsessed that no one seems inclined to make long-term investments in our well being anymore. Even the usually reliable and nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office has itself fallen prey to the myopic short-sightedness, declaring that UC doesn't need to increase its enrollment, even as it receives record numbers of applications.

In response to Sacramento's cuts and meddling, the UC finally got tough and hired former Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano, the former secretary for Homeland Security, as UC president. Last November, she confronted newly re-elected Gov. Jerry Brown and the Legislature with a choice: give UC more money or watch it raise tuition again. Sacramento leaders and their media cheerleaders howled but Napolitano's strategy worked. She ended up with more money – including crucial one-time money to cover pension costs – than anticipated.

But Napolitano still had to beg the Legislature to cover an increase in enrollment of 10,000 students over four years (and got less than half of what she asked for).

With immigration flat and the birth rate under replacement levels, California will need to attract more people from out of state to study and work here to maintain the state's vitality. It won't be easy, as other countries and states are more competitive now, especially when it comes to cost-of-living considerations, including the cost of education. So we'll have to make higher education better and cheaper.

It's an argument that Californians haven't much heard – and clearly don't understand. Maybe we all could enroll in a summer course on the importance of higher education in California, and the massive returns we receive from our investment in it.

But who would pay for it?

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