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We must change education to fit economic reality

By Hamid Shirvani

Most people can accept some belt-tightening for today. But the thought of a downsized future — a future without the opportunities we have grown used to for ourselves and expected for our children, that is a much more bitter pill to swallow.

The impact of the worldwide economic tsunami — a loss of \$33 trillion last year in the global economy — is beyond imagining. As state-mandated cuts of \$584 million roll through the California State University system, we begin to get a glimpse of a downsized future that will not only affect our children's education, but ultimately the economic prospects of our state for years. The oft-quoted statistic that for each dollar California invests in our public colleges and universities, \$4.41 is returned to our economy is hard to ignore. If cuts are inevitable, then, is a downsized future the only possible outcome?

The cuts we faced at California State University, Stanislaus, totaled \$13.5 million for the current academic year. As this figure includes one-time federal stimulus funds and furlough savings, a highly likely scenario, given California's own budget mess, is that we will face additional cuts in 2010-2011.

To achieve a cutback of this magnitude, we have had to reduce enrollments, cut classes, lay off part-time faculty and lecturers, raise fees, eliminate some management and staff positions, and institute unpaid furloughs. Indeed, we have to weather an economic tsunami of our own.

These cuts will impact student access, affordability and educational quality, and will be devastating to our students, unless we are willing to re-engineer what we do. To imagine a short-term recovery is to slip into the black hole of denial. Rational thinkers know it will take years for the global economy to rebound, and so our best course of action is to change our course of action.

As educators, we do not believe in compromising educational quality. As educators serving the Central Valley, we will not accept failing to serve our constituents with less than they need and deserve. Fortunately, as educators, we are also in the business of assessing learning institutions and of creating new knowledge. It is time to redefine how we deliver education so that the physical and fiscal cuts we are required to make will not impact the

quality of the education we offer. As educators and as citizens we do not want to shrink the potential of the future our children will see.

Looking more closely at some of the cuts we have made — cutting summer offerings in half, reducing the number of classes offered this fall by 5 percent — it is clear that students have fewer choices. But fewer options do not necessarily mean that students cannot get the courses they need or that they cannot graduate on time. Careful advisement and curricular planning, coupled with new sections of online courses, might offset some of these cuts right away.

But more important, we need to embrace a new openness to re-engineering the entire educational enterprise. We need to offer a quality education in new and innovative ways defined by lower costs and greater efficiencies.

Although it is widely acknowledged that California's investment in education beginning in the 1960s has been the engine behind the state's prosperity, we cannot wish ourselves back in time. It will take a new level of imagination to accomplish our goals with fewer resources — to work smarter, to help students and their families find ways to take these changes into account as they create their own financial and curricular plans to move forward to graduation.

Just as the best education brings imagination and creativity into play in the classroom, so we as educators must apply our brightest, boldest thinking to the educational enterprise for the sake of our children and for the health of California's economy. Today, we need to tighten our belts. But we need to retool for tomorrow, to restore the promise of the bright future we all dream of for our students and our state.

Shirvani is president of California State University, Stanislaus.