

The California Dream for education isn't dead, but it is on life support

Is the California Dream dead? Is the dream that all Californians, rich or poor, will have access to a higher education just an illusion?

No, the California Dream isn't dead, but it is on life support and must be re-examined in light of the state budget realities.

Legislators passed and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger recently signed a state budget that drastically cuts services and programs for Californians, including those who want to earn college degrees. As a result, the California State University and University of California systems will receive between 17 percent and 20 percent less state funding this year than they received two years ago. California's community colleges will receive about 7 percent less than they received last year.

The California Dream, as reflected in the state's 1960 master plan for higher education, established California as the nation's model. Approximately 2.3 million students annually attend classes in the three-tier system that promises higher educational opportunity for every resident in top-ranked public colleges and universities.

When California faced budget shortfalls in earlier years, the state's public colleges and universities experienced funding cuts from which they have still not recovered. But the magnitude of this year's cuts alone is unprecedented, and as the economy continues to struggle, the challenges will become even more complex with impacts that will be felt for many years to come.

As students returned to campuses this fall, they found increased fees, decreased class offerings, and more students crammed into the classes that remain. Programs have been eliminated, staff laid off, and professors and other employees placed on unpaid furloughs.

These cuts come at a time when the need for access to California's colleges and universities has significantly increased. A recent study by the Public Policy Institute of California predicts the state will face a shortage of one million college-educated workers to keep California's economy and businesses going by the year 2025.

Just as an increasing number of California workers are being displaced by the state's recession-plagued economy and are seeking retraining, public colleges and universities have been forced to turn away students and increase costs to those who are admitted.

We have reached a critical turning point for California's higher education institutions and the Californians we serve. Business as usual is not an option. It is time for all of us -- faculty, students, staff and administration -- to confront these challenges head on and focus our collective energies on reengineering and innovation to ensure our future success.

Higher education must redefine its place in society by implementing new ways of doing things that will enable us to be more efficient and accountable, while also preserving the quality of our academic programs and student services.

On Oct. 8, the chief executives of colleges and universities in the Central California Higher Education Consortium will meet in Turlock at Cal State Stanislaus. Our consortium includes 22 public and private colleges and universities in the Central Valley. Local consortium members include Cal State Bakersfield, Bakersfield College, Porterville College, Taft College and National University.

At the meeting, my higher education colleagues and I will be collaborative and innovative in our approach to addressing this crisis. Strategies will be discussed to help Californians seeking higher education opportunities to obtain college degrees, including sharing resources and using innovative technologies to stretch opportunities beyond an individual campus classroom.

College and university administrators, faculties and staffs will not allow the California Dream to die.

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