We must invest in higher ed

By Hamid Shirvani

The worst possible lesson parents can teach their children is that it's OK to live with a double standard. Yet that's exactly what many do if they push their children to aspire to a college education yet support Gov. Jerry Brown's draconian cuts to our state colleges and universities.

We want the best for our children, but are unwilling to make the demands on ourselves that will best provide for their future.

Brown proposes a $1.4 billion cut to higher education, of which $500 million will fall on the California State University system. Although there should be no expectation that higher education will not share in the pain of budget cuts, the extent of those cuts needs to be carefully examined with the future of our children — and California's economy — firmly in sight.

Simply put, we are headed for disaster. Cutting the budget for higher education at this level will weaken the state's ability to build a work force prepared to compete in the global economy. Just as China and India are pouring more resources into developing their universities, California is taking steps that will undercut not only the strength of our work force but also damage the intellectual and research capabilities that drive our economic engine.

The long-term economic and social prosperity of our state — the long term we push our children to study and prepare for — is clearly at risk here. Massive cuts to education will result in a lowering of access for students from underrepresented and low-income families, a reduction in the number of courses available that students who do gain entrance will need to graduate, and a reduction in the vital research programs that lead to economic innovation.

The proposed budget cuts are so severe because they are the third consecutive cut to higher education budgets. After a first cut of 8 percent, California's colleges and universities endured a massive 20 percent cut. The current proposal — a further 18 percent cut — will bring state support for the California State University system down to 1999 levels, when the system supported 70,000 fewer students.

California's 50-year-old Master Plan for Higher Education, truly a milestone in educational planning in this country or anywhere, no longer will be able to keep its promise of guaranteed admission to the CSU and UC systems and community colleges for all qualified applicants. Facing a $1.4-billion budget cut, that California dream is all but dead.

As President Barack Obama so clearly declared in his State of the Union message, we must "out-innovate, out-educate, and out-build the rest of the world." Our success in being able to out-
innovate and out-build rests squarely on the shoulders of our ability to out-educate. To cut funding for education is to cut off our access to a globally competitive economy at a time when a long-term vision is more important than ever.

Rising tuition fees have been added to offset the impact of lowered state funding for higher education, but this trend cannot continue. The funding for a California State University education for 2011-12 is at almost the same level it was in 1999-2000. Although the tuition fee has almost doubled, this represents a net loss of $1,759 per full-time equivalent. Total revenue, including the tuition fee, was $13,438 per FTE in 1998-99 and is $11,679 per FTE for 2011-12. Is there any question that we are headed in the wrong direction?

California long has been recognized as a place of spectacular innovation and creativity. The achievements of two of our leading industries — technology and entertainment, led by Silicon Valley and Hollywood — have been supported by a strong and efficient agricultural base. Together, these economic drivers have made California a place where long-term dreams were made possible by an educational system that propelled discovery and supported a competitive work force.

Yes, we all face the pain of deeper budget cuts and high and potentially higher taxes. But California needs more, not fewer, college graduates to drive our economy and our productivity up and into a more fiscally sustainable future.

Parents everywhere dream of a good education for their children. They understand that education is the key to success. If we tell our children they need to study hard to prepare for a good job, we can't take away the funds that will enable them to do what we ask, for their sake and our own.

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