Editorial: So many reasons to vote No on Proposition 92

For starters, community college measure would make state budget problems worse

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So much of California's budget is tied up in autopilot spending that the Legislature and governor now decide on less than 10 percent of the budget. The rest is formula-driven. This is killing California, preventing policymakers from adjusting priorities as needs change.

That's the main reason voters should reject Proposition 92, the "Community College Governance, Funding Stabilization and Student Fee Reduction Act." Proposition 92 would lock in yet another spending formula, giving the California Community College system a constitutional guarantee of funds – while adding no sources of revenue to pay for the additional spending. This new, minimum funding level for community colleges could be changed only by a four-fifths vote of the Legislature.

This means other state priorities – including the University of California and California State University – would be competing for a smaller share of the state budget. That's why the UC Board of Regents and the CSU Board of Trustees passed resolutions opposing Proposition 92.

The UC and CSU systems understand what this proposition is really about. It amounts to a "beggar thy neighbor" strategy – seeking benefits for the community college system at the expense of the university systems.

We'd prefer to see all three of California's public higher education systems join together to fight for higher education in the state budget process.

We'd also like to see them expose the state's real budget problem: the huge shift in state funding away from higher education and toward prisons. From 1984 to 2004, California's per capita spending on prisons increased 126 percent (in constant dollars), according to Department of Finance tables. Per capita spending on higher education declined 12 percent, the only major part of the budget to do so.

The community colleges, CSU and UC should join forces to tell that story and call for a renewed commitment to a highly educated work force and citizenry.

There are other reasons to reject Proposition 92.
It would reduce student fees from $20 per unit to $15 per unit and require a two-thirds vote of the Legislature to raise fees. The fact is, California has the lowest community college fees in the country and financially struggling students are eligible for fee waivers and federal Pell Grants. Certainly when the Legislature raised fees from $11 to $18 to $26 per unit between 2003 and 2005, it had an impact on enrollment. But last year fees dropped to $20 per unit and students are responding. Locally, the Los Rios Community College District is experiencing an enrollment boom.

Rather than fighting for lower fees for all students, regardless of need, the community college and university systems should be fighting for greater access to financial aid for the needy.

Proposition 92 also has major changes in the community college system’s board of governors that voters should reject. It increases the board to 19 members and requires the governor to appoint 10 (not just six) from faculty, students, staff and local community college district boards. This would create a board majority of community college insiders, a major shift. This, too, could be changed only by a four-fifths vote of the Legislature – or by another ballot measure.

All around, Proposition 92 is a very bad idea. Voters should reject it on Feb. 5.