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Now is wrong time to cut higher education budget

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Demand for college has never been higher, but state budget cuts threaten access for thousands of students.

This fall, California's public institutions of higher education should be embracing the state's largest high school graduating class. Instead, significant numbers of qualified students may be denied access because of the state's \$17.2 billion budget deficit and cuts in state support for higher education.

California's landmark system of public colleges and universities is a key part of the solution for our troubled economy, particularly as the need for job training and retraining escalates. Now is the time to invest in higher education for people of all ages.

We recognize and appreciate that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's revised budget for 2008-09 restores a portion of the drastic cuts proposed in January. Yet it still falls far short of meeting the needs of education at all levels.

Californians are enrolling in the state's public colleges and universities in record numbers because of the rise in high school graduates and the growing need for workforce training. The state Department of Finance projected that our combined enrollments would increase by nearly 23 percent between 2005 and 2015, bringing 503,750 more students through our doors and pushing our fall enrollment to more than 2.7 million. But as state funding for education declines, college opportunity

also declines for those future students, which will mean a decline in economic prosperity for California.

That's why the state's three branches of public higher education - the California Community Colleges, the California State University and the University of California - have joined in unity. We urge state lawmakers to make education funding a priority or see California suffer long-term economic consequences.

Our three systems are closely tied and each makes unique educational and economic contributions. Consider that six of 10 CSU graduates and one of three UC graduates begin their college careers at a community college. Community colleges train 70 percent of the state's nurses; the CSU system educates 60 percent of California's certificated teachers; and UC schools produce virtually all of our state's publicly educated doctors, lawyers and Ph.D.s. In addition, more than 1,000 California biotech, high-tech and other R&D-intensive companies put UC research to work every day.

It is vital for California's future that more students from under-served and low-income communities attend college. Currently, two-thirds of the state's pupils in K-12 schools are students of color.

We already serve the most diverse group of students in California's history. More than 55 percent of CSU's enrollment is from traditionally under-served populations. Thirty-five percent of UC students are from low-income families, the highest proportion among the nation's top research universities. In the community colleges, full-time students have a median income of \$16,223 a year. One fourth of those have incomes under \$5,544 a year. Which of these potential college graduates should we turn away?

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If 2 percent more Californians had associate's degrees and 1 percent more earned bachelor's degrees, the state's economy would grow by \$20 billion, according to a recent report by the non-profit Campaign for College Opportunity. That would mean our state and local tax revenues would increase by \$1.2 billion a year, and 174,000 new jobs would be created. For every dollar the state invests in a student's higher education, according to the report, there is a \$3 net return on investment.

California today provides a relatively small portion of financial support for CSU and UC, and funds community colleges at only about half the national average. Students and parents also bear a much larger share of the cost of education than in the recent past. To help close the gap, all three of our educational systems are working hard to raise funds privately and through grants. But a quality educational system requires broader investment.

We urge Californians to take the long view and ask their legislators to not only preserve, but increase funding to support all levels of education in California. The unintended consequences of allowing further decline will be far more costly in the long run. Reducing educational opportunity at a time of record enrollment growth makes no economic sense.

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