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Expand university funding, don't cut it

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What is a "public" university - and how much is it worth to you? That's the real question posed by a recent government report on "Investment Planning in the 21st Century," which suggests that one way to balance our state budget might be to eliminate state funding for the University of California.

We think that's a terrible idea. In fact, we believe that now more than ever the state should be investing more, not less, in our public colleges and universities.

Most Californians agree with us, according to a recent survey by the non-partisan Public Policy Institute of California: three of four think California's higher education system (University of California, the California State University campuses and community colleges) is very important to the future quality of life and economic vitality of the state, and 58 percent think current state funding for higher education is insufficient.

One Northern California newspaper observed that "we are on the verge of squandering one of the state's most valuable assets and abandoning the decades-old tradition of an affordable university education for California students."

Public universities, particularly a public research

university like those in the UC system, are unique institutions in our society. They exist to serve the public: to make educational opportunities broadly accessible; provide health care for those who can't afford it; train our engineers, doctors, lawyers and other professionals; and conduct basic research that cannot be done by private industry.

UC is crucial for solving the major public problems facing our state. UC is taking the lead in finding new ways to use energy more efficiently and fight global warming. UC is essential in our efforts to deal with rising health care costs and the growing shortage of doctors and nurses in California. UC-trained engineers make our roads, bridges and buildings safer. The state's economy relies on UC's technological innovations and workforce development to create new jobs and keep California economically competitive in the global marketplace.

Widely recognized as the best public research university in the world, UC includes more than 214,000 students and 170,000 faculty and staff, with most of its 1.5 million alumni living and working in communities across the state. In addition to nationally ranked departments in more than 150 disciplines, UC also trains more than half of the state's medical students and operates the fifth-largest health care system in California, with more than 18,000 health care professionals on staff.

It takes a lot of money to do all the things that UC does - and to do them well. This year's budget is more than \$18 billion, with less than \$4 billion coming from the state. To continue to fulfill its public mission in the future, the state must reaffirm a strong commitment to long-term funding for the university.

In 1970, 7 percent of the state's general fund went to UC. Today, that figure is less than 4 percent.

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It should come as no surprise then that student fees at UC have almost doubled during the past four years, or that lagging salaries have made it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain the top faculty.

Why is this important to the private sector - and why should local businesses and residents care if UC gets enough public funding?

The University of California is the foundation of the state's economic growth. California's economy is fueled by innovation, and UC researchers develop three new inventions every day. The leading recipient of federal research dollars, UC spends more than \$3 billion annually on research - research that gets turned into commercial applications for new products, new jobs, new businesses.

More than 1,300 companies in California put UC research to work. One in four California biotech firms was founded by UC scientists and engineers, and 85 percent of them employ UC alumni in key R&D positions. Statewide, one in six of our IT/communications companies has a UC connection, with more than half of them employing UC alumni as executives.

The investment that the state made in the system 30 or 40 years ago made Silicon Valley and the Bay Area's biotech revolution possible. To duplicate that kind of success during the next 20 years, the state needs to expand its support for higher education now.

Without our public research university, California would be just another state. Keep our university strong - and public.

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