

The Sacramento Bee, OPINION, July 10, 2011 (Page 1 of 2)

Viewpoints: Cuts to higher education pose a threat to the state's future

Special to The Bee

Are we giving up on the future?

The 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education created universal access to college for baby boomers and created the largest public university and community college system in the nation. It ensured that Californians would be well-educated, adequately prepared to enter the workforce and quickly positioned us as the eighth largest economy in the world. For many boomers, it was a sure way to reach the American Dream.

Now, the best-educated generation in our state's history seems unable or unwilling to keep that promise to the next. Investment in the state's higher education system during the past decade has been slowly eroded to the point where billions in cuts over the past decade to our community colleges and universities are becoming the norm, and current students and their families are left shouldering a substantial portion of the cost of higher education.

Even though fully two-thirds of our state legislators took advantage of a high-quality, low-cost public higher education in California and 90 percent have a bachelor's degree – the highest proportion among all legislatures across the country – they are on the verge of turning their back on this generation.

Baby boomers in California make up some of the most highly educated citizens in our state and nation, and yet are producing a generation of Californians who are less educated than they are. No one party or governor is solely to blame. Deep deficits and an inability to agree on pension reforms and taxes created a majority vote budget with deep cuts across the board.

As for the rest of us, although polling indicates high levels of support for higher education, voters seem unwilling to support the additional revenue required to prevent billions in cuts.

The supreme irony is that our investment in the higher education system is one of the areas that provide huge benefits to our state and our quality of life. Those with a college education earn higher salaries and pay higher taxes on their earnings.

And even in a recession, those with a college education are the least likely to be unemployed or require social service expenditures by the state. In addition, education creates much of the innovation that we all benefit from and that helps stimulate our economy.

Today, Silicon Valley technology makes our lives easier through computing, smartphones and green technology. We taste the fruits, vegetables and grains that our state's revolutionary agriculture industry developed to help feed the world. And leading researchers at our universities find lifesaving cures in medicine and spawn entrepreneurial ideas that create jobs and make our world a better place. This is the result of investment and foresight. Tomorrow's innovations may not be realized if we continue down this path.

The Sacramento Bee, OPINION, July 10, 2011 (Page 2 of 2)

The California budget passed recently includes \$1.7 billion in cuts to higher education including a \$650 million cut to California State University and \$650 million to the University of California. If anticipated revenues do not materialize, "trigger cuts" will mean another \$100 million in cuts to each system. For community colleges, the budget included \$400 million in cuts with additional "trigger cuts" which could mean another \$30 million in reductions and student fee increases from \$36 a unit to \$46 a unit.

In response, our colleges and universities have been forced to limit access to eligible students, recruit higher-paying out-of-state students, cut courses, lay off faculty and increase fees. The average total resident tuition and fees at the UC, CSU and community colleges has increased by more than 200 percent in the past decade. And with these additional cuts we can expect that both UC and CSU will raise fees again.

Policymakers may object to these fee increases, but in passing these cuts they leave the systems with few options. It seems college students and their families are part of a select group we are comfortable taxing.

Our policymakers, voters, along with all of us who went to college or have college dreams for our own children, must wake up to this shortsightedness. It is time for us to demand that our state restore our historic commitment to higher education before it is too late.

It is time for all of us who benefited from a college education, to expand that opportunity to others. It is time for us to do more than just say we support higher education and recognize that some things are worth the sacrifice, because the rewards are plentiful.

Michele Siqueiros, the first in her family to go to college, is the executive director of the Campaign for College Opportunity.