

EDITORIAL: End the UC tuition politics

By The Bee Editorial Board



FILE - In this Sept. 30, 2014, file photo, University of California President Janet Napolitano gestures while speaking during an interview in Oakland, Calif. Napolitano is recommending tuition increases in each of the next five years as a way to keep the public university system going and growing amid what she says is the state's failure to adequately invest in higher education. The university's governing board will vote on the proposal, set to be announced Thursday, at its Nov. 19 meeting. (AP Photo/Ben Margot, File)

BEN MARGOT — AP

When Janet Napolitano took office as president of the University of California last autumn, the former governor of Arizona made it clear she would play hardball, if need be.

Last week, after waiting for Gov. Jerry Brown to be safely re-elected, Napolitano came out swinging: If the state doesn't give the UC more money, she says, she wants to raise tuition by as much as 5% annually.

It's a gutsy move. But she shouldn't use students and their families as cannon fodder to launch the battle. Nor should Brown renege on his Proposition 30 promises about funding higher education as a way to force the UC to cut costs and innovate.

Last year, Brown offered what he called a "reality sandwich," giving the university some more money but not all it sought. He is doing the same this time.

The University of California may be the Golden State's greatest public institution. It offers a pathway for talented people of modest means to vastly improve their circumstances, fosters innovation and in many ways drives the economy.

Although demands on it have grown ever more complex, its state support has been ebbing for decades. In the short term, tuition should stay where it is. Brown and the Legislature should increase the state's investment.

But the university system needs a whole new ballgame. The governor said last year that chancellors at individual campuses need to find ways to save money. When salaries for many administrators — not faculty — exceed \$200,000, priorities are skewed.

Part of the tuition increase Napolitano seeks is to bail out UC's failed pension gamble. For 19 years ending in 2010, UC regents required no employee contribution into the pension fund. Now, the university pays \$1 billion-plus a year to deal with a pension liability of its own creation.

UC must make good on its promise to pay employees' retirement costs. But parents, students and taxpayers should not be forced to pay for the regents' uneducated guess that pension funds would magically increase in perpetuity.

At popular campuses such as UCLA and Berkeley, nearly one-third of enrollment is from outside California. And though 55% of UC undergraduates get a free ride thanks to scholarships and financial aid, the ones who don't qualify for help pay dearly. A year at a UC averages more than \$12,000 without aid. With room, board and books, the cost can top \$30,000 a year.

That's still a reasonably good deal, although private colleges increasingly find ways to match the cost of a University of California education, and many all but guarantee graduation within four years.

Proposition 30, the tax hike approved two years ago, was supposed to help. But after Brown stumped through the 10-campus system, exhorting students and parents to pass it, the initiative only yielded "an eyedrop" of money for the UC, Napolitano says.

Just 5% of the more than \$13 billion raised has gone to UC. Brown nixed appropriations that might have made up some of the difference.

Why? Partly because he is parsimonious. Partly because he believes, rightly, that the UCs have too many overpaid administrators on the payroll.

California's public universities shouldn't have to resort to brinksmanship to get the governor's attention. The future of higher education isn't a game.

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