

EDITORIAL: California's public universities deserve attention and investment



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OLIVIER DOULIERY — MCT

There's nothing like the start of a good conversation. This week, as state lawmakers gathered for a new legislative session, public higher education became the talk of the Capitol at long last.

In the wake of University of California President Janet Napolitano's threat last month to hike tuition if the state doesn't give UC more money, the Capitol suddenly is alive with long-overdue questions.

For instance: Should the state ante up like Napolitano says, and raise support for higher education? What fat can be cut from that UC budget? How about the California State universities? Would a modest financial bump help more students at Fresno State finish in four years instead of six or seven?

Regardless of the answers, the mere asking of these questions is worth applauding. For decades, California has been disinvesting in its renowned public university system, a troubling shift that has called into question the state's commitment to social mobility.

The 10 UC and 23 CSU campuses, together with California's community colleges, form one of the world's great academic and economic engines. Over the years, however, they have become ever less accessible and affordable to students.

More than half of all CSU students attend part time, largely because they work to afford the classes; at UC, tuition has

tripled during the last 20 years.

Everyone agrees that we need a comprehensive look at this issue, but no one has been able to generate the political will. Now, thanks not only to Napolitano, but to Gov. Jerry Brown, whose pending budget is expected to reflect his own ideas for higher education, California finally has a shot at intelligently considering this most pressing problem.

This week, legislative leaders signaled that it's at the top of their to-do list.

Some ideas make sense. Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de León, D-Los Angeles, and Sen. Marty Block, D-San Diego, for instance, want to keep in-state tuition flat at UC, help CSU students finish faster and expand enrollment and classes within both systems. To get there, they want to raise out-of-state tuition and fees, increase state funding and give CSU students a bonus if they finish in four years.

Some ideas seem stern. Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins wants to subject UC to "zero-based budgeting" if it raises tuition, forcing justification of every cent. And some ideas are, shall we say, nuclear options. Sen. Ricardo Lara, D-Bell Gardens, is planning this week to resurrect Sen. Leland Yee's 2009 proposal to strip UC of its autonomy and make it answer to the Legislature, like the CSU system.

What's key, though, is that we're finally talking, with more ideas to come.

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