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Time to Go Back to School

OP-ED: The state's business leaders have remained silent for too long in talks over funding higher education.

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There has been a wave of nostalgia for California's so-called Golden Years during which the Master Plan for Higher Education of 1960 was formulated. A recent letter to the Los Angeles Times declared that "whatever the schools needed, then-Gov. Pat Brown provided. High school diploma, undergraduate degree, doctoral degree (with fellowships and teaching assistantships all the way) and little student debt. That is the way it should be now. ..." Even the student protests against a tuition hike at a recent University of California Regents meeting at UCLA seemed to evoke memories of student demonstrations of the 1960s.

With nostalgia comes selective memory. Forgotten is the fact that Pat Brown lost his bid for re-election to Ronald Reagan, in large part because of the major budget crisis that had developed by 1966. Forgotten is the fact that the student demonstrations of the 1960s led to the dismissal of UC President Clark Kerr, the author of the Master Plan. As the old joke has it: Nostalgia ain't what it used to be.

Perhaps protesters didn't notice that support for the UC tuition hike included that of ex-officio regent, Assembly Speaker Karen Bass. Her support, however reluctant, tells you that the Legislature – despite the protests – is not going to change its priorities and divert more funding to UC, CSU or the community colleges. There are many reasons for the Legislature's stance. However, the key factor is that the state's demographics and politics are substantially different from what they were in 1960. Moreover, the state government's role has expanded. Back in 1960, for example, Medi-Cal did not exist. Finally, in part due to term limits, today's Legislature is not capable of taking the kind of long-run strategic view that the old Master Plan represented.

It is a truism that California's economic growth in the coming decades will depend on its ability to provide an educated work force, to develop new technologies and to attract new industries. A newly published report of the Public Policy Institute of California highlighted the importance of college graduates to the state's economy. And it is here that the business community has an important role to play. Most businesses are forward-looking; that is essentially what business investment is all about. Investment is about the production and commercial opportunities of the future, not just current sales and output. Many in the business community are concerned about the economic fate of California, not just in the current economic slump, but on an ongoing basis as the recovery takes hold.

Speaking up

For that reason, business must assert itself in the current debates over the funding of higher education in California. At present, regents meetings and legislative hearings on higher education are largely forums in which constituents within the universities and colleges make themselves heard: students, faculty and staff unions. A new UC Commission on the Future has been created and has been holding hearings around the state. But that commission, too, hears mainly the view from inside.

I regularly receive e-mail alerts from business groups that pertain to this or that pending bill, regulation or ballot proposition. But for the most part, these messages seem to be reactive and short term. Surely, the business community has views about how the California of 2010 – five decades after the Master Plan was formulated – should support its higher education system. For example, should UC or some of its campuses be privatized in some way? Or should higher ed be supported through taxes, even if other programs must be cut? Is there a better way to administer California's three higher ed systems?

Decisions about such matters will be made and are being made, even if by default. But where is the voice of the business community? To date, it has not been heard.