California universities are known around the world as the crown jewel of California’s education system. Until recent years, California’s priorities were clear: the state dedicated approximately 10 percent of its General Fund to higher education and just three percent on prisons. Today, California spends more than 10 percent on prisons and seven percent on higher education.

The Governor is proposing to change our state’s constitution to permanently ensure this never happens again. Currently, California taxpayers spend $18,000 more per prisoner than the ten largest states. Under the Governor’s initiative, no less than 10 percent of taxpayer money would be allocated to fund public institutions of higher education; and no more than seven percent of Californians money would be allocated to support of the state prison system. These mandatory limits would begin in the 2014-15 fiscal year.

To begin reaching the Governor’s goal, the amendment will require the state to begin shifting all taxpayer money deducted from the costs of operating state prisons to the budget to operate higher education beginning in the 2011-12 fiscal year, culminating with the final deadline to implement the initiative in fiscal year 2014-15. Under the proposal, the amount to shift to higher education will be determined by computing the difference between the current year’s General Fund budget and the prior year’s General Fund budget for the state prison system.

Beginning in 2014, the Legislature would be able to apply other available resources to ensure that public institutions of higher education are fully funded at no less than 10 percent of the General Fund expenditures.

To realize cost savings in corrections, the amendment expands the authority of the California Department of Corrections and rehabilitation (CDCR) to lower costs by contracting with entities outside state government for prison operations and services. In line with the Governor’s commitment to public safety, the measure prohibits releasing prisoners early as a means of reducing costs.

The amendment also provides flexibility by allowing the Governor or Legislature to suspend the mandate or modify funding levels during a fiscal emergency or other declared emergency or by a two-thirds vote of the Legislature. Unlike measures that create future debt, if a suspension is ordered by the Governor or Legislature no debt would be created.