Editorial: CSU needs big ideas at the top

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Our view: It hasn't been easy the past few years for the CSU system, which is why it needs an innovative leader who can bring about change.

The California State University system will have a new leader soon. Despite the accomplishments of outgoing CSU Chancellor Charles Reed, we think it's a welcome development.

Reed will retire as soon as the board of trustees can find his replacement, it was announced Thursday. That will take several months.

The announcement was not a surprise. Reed is 70, well past retirement age, and his annual pension will leave him very comfortable in his golden years as he moves back to Florida. Aside from that, the job has become a bear lately. Reed has tried to guide the 23-campus system, which includes Chico State University, through years of unprecedented cuts.

The thing is, after 14 years at the top, he seems to have lost the desire to do so. His recommended solutions are usually along the lines of raising tuition at an unheard of rate, freezing the salaries of low-level employees, but rewarding top administrators with fat raises.

Big ideas are needed, and the CSU's leader has failed to come up with innovative ways to help the CSU survive in a new funding era. Instead, the system doesn't change much and is suffering the proverbial death by a thousand cuts.

At the same time, Reed fails to recognize the little things that tick people off. Things like giving raises to college presidents at the same time he's raising student tuition.

Things like telling campuses to limit the number of units a student can take, when they should be encouraging students to graduate in four years or fewer. Things like hosting meetings in Long Beach where each college president and various other attendees can rack up $1,000 or so in travel expenses (ever heard of Skype?). And things like a Los Angeles television station uncovered — hundreds of thousands of dollars on CSU credit cards for catered meals and restaurant bills (with alcohol) at CSU gatherings, conferences and business meetings.
Reed has done some good things as well, but it seems to us he had more fire in the belly to make changes when he first took over. It's time to hire somebody — a person of ideas — who can lead the CSU into a new era for higher education.

A crisis is the best time for revolutionary thinking. The CSU needs to find a leader who can produce it.