Our view: Universities want more funding and legislators want more accountability. With money tight, people fight.

Is it our imagination, or are things getting a bit prickly between the state Legislature and California's three systems of higher education? We don't think the friction is fiction.

As funding support from the Legislature continues to shrink, and seems disproportionate to some of the other spending issues the Legislature refuses to tackle, the higher education systems have struck back with increasingly combative language criticizing the politicians for their uncaring decisions.

One statement repeated often is that the state spends more on prisons than it does on higher education, which ignores the reality that the state must both educate the good citizens and incarcerate the unlawful ones. It's not an either/or proposition.

That's just one example, as the higher education folks have developed their talking points and stick to them. When the California State University and University of California trustees vote to raise tuition every year, they place the blame clearly on the legislators. It appears legislators are growing tired of it.

The Legislative Analyst's Office, a nonpartisan agency that studies issues and makes recommendations to the Legislature, issued a report last week that criticized the CSU and UC systems for a lack of accountability to legislators and the public. (See the report at www.lao.ca.gov.)

The report was requested by legislators, who seem to believe an oversight board is needed. There once was one, but it was eliminated in a budget cut, which is rich irony. Now legislators have no oversight — they in effect just write a check every year — and want to know the money they give to higher education is being spent wisely.

The Legislative Analyst's Office reinforces the legislators' fears. For example, two sections are headlined, "Need for Coordination and Oversight Well Established" and "Persistent Oversight Concerns Span Decades."
Instead of having oversight, the report cites cases where the public is left out of the process. For example, the UC decided to change its admissions policy from admitting the top 12.5 percent of high school seniors to admitting just the top 11 percent. The CSU, in another example, decided to set its executive compensation levels by comparing itself to more prestigious schools, inflating salaries of its administrators.

The Legislative Analyst's Office said some of the allocations of resources do not make sense, and said the state should be more involved in fundamental spending decisions.

While we usually say spending decisions are best made at the local level, not in Sacramento, this is different. This is one monolith (the state Legislature) against another (the CSU trustees and UC regents). The reason legislators should have more say in spending priorities in this case is that legislators are elected officials, while university trustees are not. This is taxpayer money. It should be managed by people accountable to the taxpayers.

Whether that means a new oversight board, as the Legislative Analyst's Office suggests, is another matter. We don't think it's a wise time for the state to be creating some new body. But we hope college administrators and trustees are at least getting the clue that there needs to be more accountability to the public. You can bet the Legislature will remind the universities of that fact often as the state's fiscal woes continue.