California’s public higher education system, once the envy of the world, is struggling. To survive in a way that continues to fulfill its mission, we need to break the mold on how it operates.

State budget cuts have stripped our universities to the bone. And the promise of nearly free, accessible higher education has all but disappeared as cuts have forced tuition increases. What was once a rite of passage for all qualified young people is increasingly becoming untenable for many prospective students.

Some lucky people may have the option to simply choose another university, perhaps a private institution. But many more students, particularly those from low-income and traditionally underserved backgrounds, may have no choice but to forgo a university degree. This situation has caused those of us who have spent our careers advocating for accessible public higher education to ask: Is this the direction our state — and sooner or later our country — should be taking?

During the “golden days” of public higher education, particularly in California, universities played a crucial role in the growth of post-World War II America. Public universities gave returning GIs and other young people an opportunity to learn skills, land jobs and take their place in the nation’s booming middle class.

Today, public higher education is just as important, if not more so, in workforce success. The pathway to a good job is through knowledge-based and creative industries, such as biotechnology and computer science, that require a college degree. Getting off the college track means missing out on the fastest-growing and best-paying careers.

In order to remain accessible to the students it is designed to reach, public higher education is going to have to look very different in terms of both funding and structure. We are going to need new strategies, such as:
Operating year-round, online. Why shouldn’t students — especially those who must work — be able to study when and where they need to? The best way to make college accessible is to make the classes accessible any time, anywhere.

Creating a career-based funding model. Scrap the tuition/fees model for needs-based financial aid and consider a system that charges a fixed cost for a degree. For example, it might cost $25,000 to become a teacher and $40,000 to become an engineer. The money would go to the institution to cover the costs of the degree. When students graduate and get jobs, they pay back the money through income taxes. A teacher would have a smaller payback, for example, than an engineer, who presumably would earn a higher salary. Those who stay in the chosen career in the state for a fixed number of years would pay less.

Building stronger partnerships with underserved communities. Public universities need to do outreach to help prospective students understand what it takes to get to college, and help them get there. The California State University’s Super Sunday program in African American churches is a great example of how direct and focused attention to a community can help more students get on the right track.

Requiring specifics in accountability. Public universities need to demonstrate how they are contributing to the cause, and that means regular reporting of enrollment, demographics and graduation statistics. A university should be able to report, for example, how many Pell grant students have graduated, or how many graduates have gone on to become engineers. CSU has such information on every campus’ website. Students and parents can use it to assess net tuition and whether the school is a good fit; policymakers can look at it to see how efficient a university is, as well as understand student demographics; and it would give the public a better understanding of the role the university plays in the workforce.

Will policymakers be able to create any or all of these changes? If they don’t, our public universities are on the path toward becoming a very exclusive club, leaving out the very students who make up the bulk of our future workforce and economy. And if higher education abandons these students, we do so at our country’s economic peril.

Charles B. Reed, chancellor for the last 14 years of the 23-campus California State University, the nation’s largest university system, is retiring at the end of the year.