CSU executive pay distracts from the real issue – harm to higher ed caused by cuts

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Regardless of the degree, one of the most important skills the California State University expects of its students is the ability to think critically. A key component of critical thinking is the ability to distinguish symbols from facts.

Many have clung to the symbol of hiring decisions the university needs to make to ensure continued quality for students. These decisions have amounted to spending in the tens of thousands of dollars. This symbol has been used to hide the fact that the CSU has sustained cuts in state support totaling near $1 billion and remains short $500 million even after tuition increases.

The elected student leaders serving on the California State Student Association board continually insist that their university presidents must be highly qualified to oversee complex institutions – especially during bad budget times. We also understand that providing appropriate and competitive salaries is necessary for the university to operate effectively.

In fact, San Diego State's elected student leaders have stood up on multiple occasions to celebrate President Elliot Hirshman's tenure at SDSU. Their president has led a fundraising effort bringing in nearly $2 million a week since he began his job. He even kicked off the public phase of a multimillion-dollar fundraising campaign with $100,000 of his own money. His efforts will create thousands of new scholarships as well as new educational opportunities for students and research opportunities for faculty.

We expect much from our presidents. We expect them to be accomplished academics. San Jose State's new president is an expert in nuclear engineering. We expect them to be a national voice on issues relevant to students. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan appointed CSU Fullerton's new president to the U.S. Committee on Measures of Student Success. We expect them to be good fundraisers. The new presidents at Cal Poly San Luis Obisbo and San Diego
State led efforts to bring in more than $30 million and $60 million in new money, respectively, since their recent appointments.

We also expect presidents to provide for student safety, give direction to a campus, engage the community, be present in student life and make the hard budget choices in consultation with numerous competing campus groups.

The California State Student Association believes that the board of trustees should continue to evaluate delicate trade-offs and govern difficult hiring and compensation decisions internally. We recognize that executive compensation is simply not a culprit for the CSU’s budget woes.

While we appreciate the attention given to the CSU by the media, public and members of the Legislature, we believe this attention would be better spent highlighting and reversing the elimination of state resources allocated to the CSU.

As a mere fraction of 1 percent of the CSU’s total budget, preoccupation with the compensation of our university system’s leaders is misplaced. The student association is much more concerned about the 33 percent cut in state support for the university. This disinvestment is what hurts students and the state of California.

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