Abysmal and unacceptable is the only way to describe it. Only 8 percent of 2,469 students who started as freshmen at Sacramento State in fall 2007 graduated in four years.

As Bee reporters Diana Lambert and Phillip Reese showed in a Sunday story, even in the best years, the four-year graduation rate has been flat at around 10 percent.

It's not much better across the California State University system of 23 campuses, where 15.8 percent in the class of 2011 graduated in four years.

To say the least, the personal impact of failing to graduate or taking many years to graduate can be devastating to students.

Far too often, the CSU system has put the blame for these graduation rates on students. Familiar excuses abound. Students are working long hours. They're not adequately prepared for college-level work. They repeat courses numerous times. They enroll in the wrong courses. They take too many courses.

Or the state Legislature is to blame. This certainly is largely true. Five years ago, the state provided $3 billion (66 percent of CSU's total funds). This year that dropped to $2 billion (45
percent of total funds). But instead of fighting effectively for what should be a state priority, administrators and faculty just seem to throw up their hands at the big budget hits of the last five years.

Students have seen tuition and fee increases – from $3,000 five years ago to $5,500 today. Where students paid 25 percent of the cost of a CSU education in 2007-08, today they pay more than 40 percent of the cost. And what do they get out of their increased investment?

As Lambert and Reese showed, they've gotten declining course offerings. Increasingly, students can't get the classes they need to graduate in four years. And this has spiraling effects; if they can't get into required classes, they risk losing financial aid – and, of course, spending more time and money in school.

In their desperation, CSU administrators use all sorts of measures that do little to increase education quality – but do save money. This includes hiring more temporary, part-time faculty; offering "variable pricing" for high-demand courses; and reducing and diluting requirements that focus on "the students' development as whole or 'educated' people" – what distinguishes CSU from a trade school – so students can get out more quickly. They also are starting up overseas programs – like the misleadingly labeled "Silicon Valley MBA" that Sacramento State is starting up in Singapore – to bring in cash from foreign students.

CSU needs to return to basics – its mission of graduating California students who are prepared to be productive citizens. Each CSU campus needs to work with each entering freshman to set up a four-year plan to graduation that includes general education, required courses in the major, and electives. Transfers need a two-year plan. Campuses need to set up a registration priority system so students can get into the courses they need for graduation.

Despite budget cuts, the CSU system has enough money to graduate more than 8 percent to 10 percent of entering students within four years.

The people of California and their elected representatives need to do some soul-searching, too. Year after year of cuts will not produce better CSU system.
What I do not understand is why the CSU and UC systems still have REMEDIAL courses in English and mathematics! The Bee has published the statistical facts showing that a dismal proportion of entering freshman require such remediation to do college-level work. Eliminate these courses, and apply that money to the university course work that students need! Of course, that would require that admission standards be enforced, and that high schools stop the outrageous grade inflation that is customary. That would mean actually requiring students to show competency before being promoted, and the end of "social promotion." That would require a commitment to make a public education available until completion of high school or GED, and no tolerance for dropping-out. I don't have a problem with issuing two different high school completion documents: a "Certificate of Attendance" for those who cannot pass a reasonable assessment of basic academic skills, and the "Diploma" for those who do pass.

I've put this question to State legislators in every district where I've lived for the past 25 years, and have yet to have any response from any of them.

We are expecting too many children to go to college, graduate, and find a well-paying job. Many children pushed down this path are totally unqualified for the academic rigors that are required of them. Instead, they should be encouraged to pursue a vocational education. As Judge Smails told Danny when he whined about not getting into college: "Well, the world needs ditch diggers, too."

The 8% graduation rate in four years is absolutely shameful. This should be a focus of the CSUS campus, but it obviously has no place on the leadership's agenda. "I couldn't get the class I needed," is such a common phrase from Sac State students that I would never want my son to attend this campus.

It's somewhere between Cosumnes River College and Heald. I have seen a half dozen kids choose UNR in Nevada because they can finish in four years. Even focused, committed students with a decided major can't get their CSUS degree in four years.

The school's record is disgraceful.