A subcommittee of the California State University Board of Trustees has come up with a compromise policy on compensation for CSU presidents. The new policy is supposed to quiet the roar of disapproval from students, faculty and the Legislature in the wake of recent hefty pay increases for top university administrators.

Sorry, it's not working.

Given the fiscal crisis the university system faces, and the sacrifice students and faculty are being asked to make, the public has a right to expect top leaders to lead by example. Unfortunately, the new policy does not require shared sacrifice.

Under it, newly hired university presidents would receive a base salary paid with public funds no higher than the base pay of the presidents they are replacing. Salary compensation above the previous presidents' base pay, the trustees' compromise resolution states, "shall be paid from foundations."

In other words, private donors would kick in to up the new university presidents' salaries. While CSU officials say the plan is that any supplemental pay would be limited to 10 percent above the base salary, that limit is conspicuously absent from the resolution. In fact, university officials have made it clear they don't want the 10 percent set in stone because they want flexibility to offer even more.

It is probably true, as university officials argue, that the pay packages CSU offers are lower than what presidents earn at some comparable institutions across the country. It is also true that the job is difficult and increasingly complex. In recent years, to make up for the loss of public support, university presidents, together with their spouses, have become fundraising machines, expected to bring in millions of dollars in private donations and grants.

Still, California is in crisis. The state university system has lost $1 billion in state support just over the last 18 months. If voters don't approve tax measures expected to be on the November ballot, the system could lose another $200 million. Course offerings are being cut. Student fees have increased dramatically. Parents who pay those fees have lost jobs or seen their incomes stagnate or drop.
In such an atmosphere, college presidents must be in a position to demand sacrifice from others who work at the university. That's hard to do when they are making 10 percent more than their already handsomely compensated predecessors.

If CSU wants to regain public support, it must begin recruiting a new breed of university presidents – public servants who don't expect to get rich but are loyal to the institution and its mission. Perhaps the chancellor and the trustees need to look more closely at the talent pool within the institution, a pipeline of educators who've moved through the ranks from professor, to department chair, to dean or provost. Surely there are talented educators, many with proven fundraising abilities, who could do the difficult job of a university president for a mere quarter million dollars a year.

After all, these are public universities, not private corporations.