The California State University system has taken a big budget hit in the last five years.

Five years ago, the state provided $3 billion (66 percent of total funds). This year that dropped to $2 billion (45 percent of total funds).

This decline in state support has had serious consequences for students.

They have seen significant 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. Students also have seen declining course offerings and cuts in enrollment. All of this makes it difficult for students to complete programs in a timely manner.

In this climate of diminished state support, administrators seek to hold the line on spending – and try to find new ways to raise funds. Faculty worry about quality – the temptation to increase class sizes or rely more heavily on temporary or part-time faculty – and the push toward a high-fee, high-fundraising model, with more courses offered in the higher-priced Extended Education program.

Unfortunately, at a time when CSU needs to put its best foot forward to win much-needed public support, a yawning trust gap has emerged between administration and faculty – which can only hurt the university in the eyes of the public.

They seem headed for a replay of events when the three-year faculty contract expired in 2005. After nearly two years of negotiation, impasse and failed mediation, the faculty approved a first-ever faculty vote to strike in March 2007. That strike was only canceled the day before the strike, when the parties finally reached a settlement.

Here we are in 2012. The latest three-year contract expired in June 2010. Talks on a new three-year contract that would end in June 2014 went to impasse in November and mediation failed April 6. Faculty members are holding a vote this week and next on whether to authorize a series of two-day strikes that would roll among the 23 CSU campuses at the end of this spring term or next academic year, if no agreement is reached – a sign of the breakdown in relations.

In the meantime, a "fact-finding" stage proceeds, where a neutral third party issues a report on outstanding issues.
Both administration and faculty say they are committed to completing the fact-finding process with the goal of reaching an agreement as quickly as possible. That's good. Every day at loggerheads is a day away from cooperation on common goals – maintaining the quality of instruction and affordable student access to courses.

Every day at loggerheads also is a loss in the battle for public good will – with a key election on state funding coming in November.

Both sides have legitimate issues – from concerns about realistic budgeting to class sizes to the role of temporary faculty. What they don't have is a relationship where such issues can be resolved.

The stakes for California are too high to let this drag on. CSU grants more than one-half of the state's bachelor's degrees and one-third of the state's master's degrees. It prepares more graduates in business, engineering, agriculture, communications, health, and public administration than any other California college or university system. It produces more than half of California's teachers.

Think about the students and the state – and come to a settlement.

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