Editorial: Students draw the line:  
No more cuts to higher ed

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At their annual "March in March" rally, student government representatives from the California Community College, California State University and University of California systems joined Monday for a lobbying day at the state Capitol. Their aim was to focus legislative attention on higher education issues.

This year, that "Pound the Pavement for Education: March in March" rally has taken on more urgency. The state since 2007-08 has cut $2.7 billion out of the budgets of the University of California, the California State University, and the California Community Colleges.

The trend toward greater privatization continues – with significant tuition increases and pressure on campuses to raise outside private donations. Tuition has nearly doubled over the past five years.

Public colleges and universities also have cut back on course offerings, which makes it difficult for students to complete certificates and degrees in a timely manner.

On Monday, student signs at the Capitol captured the sentiments felt on many campuses:

• "Do We Look Like Fools? More $$$ and Years to Graduate."

• "Education is our greatest economic investment."

• "This is not charity. We're talking about a return on investment!"

Gov. Jerry Brown has said that public colleges and universities face more cuts of $400 million if California voters in November reject a ballot initiative to raise taxes.

Despite wide-ranging views in the crowd of a few thousand, those gathered on the steps of the Capitol on Monday afternoon rallied around a consistent message: They called on Brown and lawmakers to reject a budget deal with more education cuts or tuition increases.

But other things were going on. This year's rally coincided with other forces trying to grab public attention – initiative supporters hoping to pass a tax measure in November to fund education and Occupy movement protesters who say that "rather than soliciting legislators" they wanted to "reclaim the state building for a people's assembly."
These two groups are very different – one sees value in the ballot box and had tables to register voters and sign petitions; the other sees the ballot box as "woefully insufficient" as a way to bring about change. Their aim is disrupting the status quo.

Those who have faith in the ballot box seem not too worried that voters may facing three competing tax measures in November. They point to 1988, when voters faced five automobile insurance reform initiatives. One passed. The Field Poll's Mark DiCamillo told the San Francisco Chronicle that multiple tax measures might actually work to convince voters that at least one should pass.

The disrupters may cause a news splash but don't seem well-placed to help win stable state funding to preserve California's public colleges and universities as an engine of opportunity. For that, you need students, faculty, the business community and others who can convince legislators and voters about the toll that ongoing disinvestment in our colleges and universities is taking on students, their families, business recruitment and innovation.

Students have picked the right location for sending a message. But with all the side agendas, supporters of public higher education need to avoid getting distracted. With persistence, not just acts of symbolism, they can stem the tide of cuts to higher education.