Viewpoint: State's future depends on higher education

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Clark Kerr, the former University of California president, was probably not the first person to say it and he won't be the last, but he was on target when he noted, "The best investment that any society makes is in the education of its young people."

For decades in California, state leaders and the public behaved as if they could not agree more.

Financial and political support for California's higher education system was unshakable. Hard-working students and their families knew a college education and the promise of a productive and prosperous life were affordable and within reach of virtually everyone who was interested.

In the process, California became an economic Goliath where anyone who put in the effort could get ahead. California was the cutting edge of American prosperity, building an innovation economy that even today exceeds the gross domestic product of most nations.

As UC Davis chancellor and as president of the UC Davis student body, we share a growing sense of alarm over the public's systematic disinvestment in higher education over the past decade.

This has been terribly shortsighted and destructive. Diminished state support for higher education has caused undue financial hardship on students and their families through repeated tuition and fee increases.

It has also been the leading cause of protests and civil disobedience roiling our campuses. Who can blame our students for being frustrated and angry over dramatically higher costs and personal debt obligations even as our universities are contracting and students face a post-graduation job picture that looks anything but promising?

This is regrettable enough. But what all Californians should find ominous, regardless of whether anyone in your family has designs on a college education, is that the state's economic future is also being jeopardized.

When we stop investing in higher education, we stop investing in the future. How can California maintain its position as one of the world's most dynamic and diverse economies when we keep
cutting the higher education system that got us there? When we stop providing our young students with the skills and knowledge they'll need to compete in the 21st century global economy, we're holding them back and we're holding back California.

We are seeing this play out in an alarming new trend highlighted earlier this month in a report titled "Defunding Higher Education," published by the Public Policy Institute of California, a nonpartisan think tank.

Despite the fact that California is graduating more high school students than ever before – that's the good news – higher college costs and reduced services are causing fewer and fewer of those graduates to enroll in California's public colleges and universities. That's the bad news.

"If current enrollment trends persist," the report said, "California faces an alarming loss of college graduates at a time when the state needs to be developing a more highly skilled workforce to ensure its future prosperity."

According to the PPIC, California "will fall 1 million college graduates short of economic demand by 2025 unless enrollment and graduation rates improve substantially."

We will need a renewed commitment from our elected leaders and the public to see those rates improve and the picture brighten. In other words, a firm renewal of the promise California made with its visionary higher education Master Plan of 1960, which presupposed that a college-educated population was valuable enough for all of us to invest in, whether we had students in our family or not.

To make up just part of the state funding that has been cut from UC, tuition has gone up 84 percent the past four years. UC regents are scheduled to vote on another 6 percent increase in July.

Under the revised budget proposed last week by Gov. Jerry Brown, California is $16 billion in the red. It is good news that even with the large deficit, the governor recognizes the need to reinvest in higher education and proposes increasing UC's state funding by about $60 million.

But he has also said he will be forced to cut $250 million from both UC and California State University if voters in November defeat his proposal to temporarily raise the sales tax a quarter cent and the income tax on high earners.

This would have more disastrous consequences. It is unfair and unacceptable to impose an additional burden on students. We must make the quality education that UC offers more accessible, not less.

At the rate we're going now, UC will become the most expensive public higher education system in the nation within the next five years, according to the PPIC report.

We understand that California's economy and the state budget are still in bad shape. But one of the best ways to revive our economy and generate more state revenue is to make sure our
renowned higher education system is affordable, accessible and world-class. To do anything less is to foolishly gamble with our students' future and with the state's.