Dan Walters: CSU plunges overboard into politics

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The California State University system has traditionally been the steady workhorse of California higher education, generating the engineers, teachers, accountants and middle-managers that any society needs.

Meanwhile, the more prestigious University of California has been the racehorse, scooping up money from alumni, foundations and corporations, luring Nobel laureates to its faculty, awarding advanced degrees, fostering world-class scientific research and flaunting its constitutional independence from political control. While the state Legislature can mandate policy at CSU, UC answers only to its regents.

However, under its just- retired chancellor, Charles Reed, CSU expanded its horizons markedly, breaking UC’s legal stranglehold on awarding doctorate degrees in some fields, ambitiously courting outside financial support, and even, on some campuses, expanding into big-time sports competition.

Politically, CSU exploited its one advantage over UC – a direct connection to the Legislature as a dependent system with campuses in virtually every corner of the state. And it developed a political swagger that in the past only UC could wield.

There is, however, a downside to that more aggressive CSU posture – an arrogance that could, and should, backfire.

One indication of that downside is the degree to which some CSU faculty members baldly used their positions to campaign for Proposition 30, the Nov. 6 tax measure that Gov. Jerry Brown is sponsoring. If it fails, he and the Legislature have decreed, K-12 schools and the state's four-year colleges would feel the financial pain.

The blatant campaigning for Proposition 30 on some campuses clearly violated state law. When Proposition 30 opponents began hammering on it, CSU officials were compelled to curtail it.

However, that didn't deter Reed, as a final gesture before retiring, from issuing a "legislative scorecard" rating all 120 members of the Legislature on how well they supported CSU and its
agenda during the 2011-12 biennial session, declaring that "the university also holds the state's elected officials accountable to support the CSU in achieving its mission and goals."

Like all such "scorecards" issued by special interests, CSU's version is highly selective on the issues it grades. Not surprisingly, Democrats score highly while Republicans are given low marks – the ratings are reduced to A-to-F letter grades – because the system's biggest interest is getting more tax money.

It's an arrogant act that even the University of California, renowned for its haughtiness, would not dare perform, and it's completely and utterly wrong for a tax-supported state agency to engage in what is nothing more than rank political and partisan propaganda.

If CSU can get away with this, what prevents any state agency from doing the same with our money?

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