The thousands of college students who marched on the Capitol on Monday to protest rising fees and decreasing state support had a point: Higher education has taken a disproportionately heavy drubbing in recent years as politicians attempted – and largely failed – to balance the state budget.

The Legislature's budget analyst has calculated that under Gov. Jerry Brown's 2012-13 budget, state general fund spending on the University of California, the state university system and community colleges will have dropped 21 percent in five years, while fee and tuition revenue will have increased by 64 percent.

Several of those politicians uttered sympathetic words as they addressed protesters. But they sidestepped the political trade-offs that cut college funds and avoided any mention of the Brown tax plan they have endorsed.

"We can't do it alone. We need your help," Assembly Speaker John A. Pérez told the students. "You have the right to be mad," Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg declared, adding that state needs "a revenue measure to put more money into higher education."

But as Steinberg decried "Republican obstructionism," he didn't mention that he opposes the so-called "millionaires' tax" measure for education that most of the protesters prefer, and has endorsed Brown's alternative income and sales tax measure that would not increase college support.

The reason why college funds have been cut so deeply, and why Capitol politicians would be unlikely to increase them even were taxes to be raised, is fairly simple.

The state's general fund is overwhelmingly devoted to four major categories: K-12 education, health and welfare services, prisons and higher education.

K-12 education finances are protected, albeit not completely, by Proposition 98, which voters passed in 1988, and teacher union clout. Even if K-12 funds are reduced, the shortfalls must be repaid later.
Health and welfare services involve not only state funds, but federal money. They have been cut, but many reductions require federal waivers and are subject to court battles, and their advocates are well organized and vocal about life-and-death impacts.

Direct prison expenses are being reduced, albeit slowly, as low-level felons are diverted into local jails under Brown's "realignment" program, but the savings are being given to counties so the net effect on the budget is scant. Politicians are also fearful of public backlash should felons' sentences be reduced.

That leaves higher education, which lacks the legal protections and the political clout of the other three.

Students may noisily protest, but they don't contribute money to politicians' campaigns, and their voting levels are notoriously low.

The budget is a zero-sum game, and higher education plays a weak hand.