To: Campus Community  
From: Paul J. Zingg, President  
Subj: The Occupy Movement and the Future of Public Higher Education in California

As the spring semester gets underway, I want to share some thoughts with you about the Occupy movement and its connection to efforts of students and others throughout California to address the critical issues of access, affordability, accountability, and quality in our public institutions of higher education. In addition, I want to bring you up to date on where things stand with our budget situation and what likely lies ahead for us. Being aware of these matters is especially important in order to inform the Occupy message and other advocacy efforts and to make their impact more credible and more forceful.

First, let me emphasize what I have often said to students: It is not only right for students to express themselves on issues that matter to them, it is necessary.

No one can speak for students better than students. Yes, others may echo their concerns, but no voice for students is more genuine, more impactful, than their own. For that voice — informed, focused, and united — not only represents the potential of great numbers, but also speaks to the fundamental promise and purpose of higher education — the future.

Students are the future. Thus, they have the right — they have the obligation — to hold political and higher education leaders in this state responsible for ensuring that they are mindful of our students’ future. And if these leaders deny that responsibility, they not only ignore the concerns of current students, but they dash the hopes of those who will follow them. Yes, we are seeing a lot of anger being expressed about increasing student fees and decreasing state funding for higher education. But it will pale in comparison with the disaffection and turmoil that will come if anger is displaced with despair. For despair is the absence of hope.

Education is about hope. It is the responsibility of our political leaders to provide the resources to ensure hope. It is the responsibility of our university leaders to steward those resources wisely and effectively and give concrete expression to that hope. It is
the students’ right to call all of us to task on the key questions of commitment and accountability.

Since I last communicated with you on these matters, two actions have occurred affecting funding for higher education in California. First, Governor Brown slashed another $100 million in state General Fund support from the budget of the California State University in mid-December. This means that the CSU is operating this year with $750 million, or 28%, less state funding than it had a year ago. Student fees -- as rapidly and as high as they have risen -- have only covered about half of this loss of state dollars. At Chico State, the loss of state dollars this year has been almost $30 million.

Yet, despite this terrible situation, average course loads for Chico State undergraduates are at a record high, as are other indicators of student success such as first-to-second year retention rates and overall graduation rates. In other words, students are showing their determination and commitment to graduating from Chico State during these tough times. Our faculty, staff, and administrative leadership have managed our declining resources purposefully to ensure, first and foremost, that there are classes for students to take and that there are other resources and services available to support student progress to degree completion.

This is a test of accountability and it brings me to the second budget-related matter that will play out over the next ten months.

In his January budget message, the governor did not restore any funding for the CSU. In fact, he completely rejected the budget request of the CSU Board of Trustees. Instead, he announced his intention to place a measure on the November 2012, ballot that would raise some income taxes and increase the state sales tax in order to support education. These taxes are expected to generate about $7 billion in new revenues for the state. These tax increases – and public support for them – are at the heart of his plan to reduce the huge budget deficits crippling our state and to restore funding for all levels of public education. If this measure fails to pass, however, the governor has already said that he would further reduce the CSU budget by $200 million. If that happens, funding for the CSU will have been reduced by $950 million from 2010-2011 to a level not seen since 1996 when the CSU enrolled 95,000 fewer students than it does today.

On one hand, especially for education, new revenues sound like an attractive proposition. And the governor surely is banking on the support of students and educators throughout the state to ensure enactment of his budget strategies. But, fearing that one person’s “solution” may be another’s problem, it is very important that students, in particular, organize their message to the governor. They should seek clarification of his intentions with these new revenues and they should declare their expectations for this funding, assuming, of course, that the ballot measure passes and the funds become available.

More specifically, key questions on the issues of access, affordability, accountability and quality include:
How much funding is guaranteed for higher education? How will it be distributed among community colleges, the University of California, and the California State University?

Will this funding be sustained over several years? If so, will it reduce student fees, or, at least stabilize and make them more predictable? This, of course, is also a question for the governing boards of both the CSU and UC.

Will sustained funding translate into access, that is, enrollment growth? Again, a question for the governing boards as well.

What expectations will be placed on higher education institutions with restored state funding? For example, will – or should – they be held more accountable for ensuring student success and progress to degree with restored funding? Will – or should – they be held to higher standards of demonstrating their contributions to the larger public good?

How does the governor propose to support higher education if his ballot measure does not pass?

Indeed, not just students, but all of us should seek and get answers to these questions. Moreover, the answers should provide us with confidence that a long-range plan for public higher education in California will emerge. Such a plan needs to be predicated on the understanding that a strong, knowledge-based economy, a sound social fabric, social justice, individual opportunity, a healthy population, a clean environment, and so many other elements of the California Dream depend upon the quality of our institutions of higher education and authentic access of the people of our state to them. This was the vision and the promise of the original 1960 Master Plan. And it worked as California prospered through the educated workforce, orientation to serving the public good, engaged citizenry, and creative leadership which emerged from its institutions of higher learning. It is time to restore that vision and renew that promise!

The answers to these questions will largely determine in which direction higher education will be going in California. In this respect, the Occupy movement has the potential to influence the answers to the questions posed. If the movement embraces tactics that will gather, not alienate, potential supporters; if it signals that voting can have an impact and that these votes come with firm expectations of the politicians who court them; if its arguments are informed and clearly, consistently stated; and if its focus is the future, not merely an immediate or self-serving agenda – if all this happens, the Occupy movement will have meaning, support, and far-reaching impact. And all of us will mark the day when this movement gained traction, connected to other advocacy efforts, and made a difference.

As always, I welcome your thoughts and responses to this message. I will continue to keep you informed on budget and other matters as developments occur. Thank you for everything you do for this University. I wish everyone a very successful spring semester.