



State must invest in higher education

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By Timothy P. White

My story is not unlike that of many of the students I talk with every day. I am an immigrant. I am also the first person in my family to attend college, an experience that changed my life and put me on a different path than one I could have ever envisioned.

My parents came from a very modest background, and when I was young we immigrated from Argentina to Canada, and eventually settled in Pleasant Hill. The first job that I ever had was delivering the Green Sheet – a newspaper known today as the Contra Costa Times – to 90 homes on a bike with no brakes. I got up at 4 in the morning to finish my route before swim practice, and I never broke a window.

That was the work ethic of my family, and as I finished high school, my parents assumed I would – and encouraged me to – get a job. But I saw friends going off to college, and so I applied to Diablo Valley Community College, Fresno State and UC Berkeley and was accepted at all three. My family and I had no understanding of how the three units of California public higher education worked together as had been brilliantly envisioned by the California Master Plan. I only knew I could attend. My dad picked the least expensive one, and off I went.

At every level of my academic experience – first at a community college, then at two California state universities and finally at UC Berkeley – my worldview changed. I went in with one set of expectations and was exposed to much more. I had wanted to be a coach at the collegiate level, but when I got to UC Berkeley, I discovered there was a world of research, science and critical thinking.

In many ways, my life story is the embodiment of the Master Plan, California's promise to give students opportunities for a better life through public higher education. The Master Plan is somewhat tattered these days, with the state's tremendous disinvestment in higher education coupled with the growing number of students seeking access. Some of the plan's bedrock policies – such as free or almost-no-cost tuition – are gone forever. But the principles on which the plan was developed are brilliant and remain.

Our leaders of public higher education institutions recognize the shifting landscape of education and know we must push innovation, creativity and outside-the-box thinking. We need to be relentless in our focus on students. They are the faces of our future. Yet they look different than previous generations, learn differently and expect to be challenged in ways that make sense to them. It is our responsibility to change and adapt, to spur deeper thinking and to push technology and new ways of teaching. Thus, we have seen the California Community Colleges prioritize class registration for those seeking degrees to help ensure students can complete a degree or transfer to a four-year school in a timely fashion.

California State University, one of the most efficient educational systems in the country, continues to provide access to more than 426,000 students despite steep cuts to its state funding. At the University of California, we have adjusted expectations and sought new ways to move forward. For example, we opened the medical school at UC Riverside with initial funding from outside sources. It recently received accreditation.

Yet new thinking will take these treasured institutions only so far: Public higher education in California needs a predictable, sustainable level of funding. This is an investment in California's future, its economy, environment and the social mobility of its residents. We cannot let the economy of the day get in the way of the need of the moment. As chancellor at UC Riverside, I have found great joy in talking with our students, many who are first-generation college students. The weight of an entire family's hopes and dreams sometimes lies on the shoulders of these students. I worry these hopes and dreams for a better future are in jeopardy.

Ironically, I gained some of the most valuable insights into the burdens our students carry when I posed as a fictional UC Riverside employee, "Pete Weston," for an episode of the TV show "Undercover Boss." Beyond the insights, the experience was an amazing opportunity to reinforce the life-changing nature of education.

My father was like many immigrants who want a better life for their children. He always said, "Give beyond self," and that is what I have tried to do. I have doubled down on my commitment to the state of California, a place that transformed me personally and for which, despite all of the challenges, I have great hope and optimism. I am reminded – and I would remind you – it is our collective responsibility to support this state's historically wise investment in the next generation.

Timothy P. White, chancellor of UC Riverside, will become chancellor of the California State University system in December.