



Editorial: Gov. Brown can push universities in right direction

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Gov. Jerry Brown plans to attend the University of California Board of Regents meeting this week and the California State University board of trustees meeting next week. His re-engagement with higher education, key to prosperity and quality of life in California, is a good thing.

His presence at meetings on administrative pay had the effect of winning much-needed restraint. Now he's urging further spending restraint and better outcomes.

Brown has some bargaining power. His successful campaign for Proposition 30 and his proposed budget for the next two years stabilizes state funding for higher education after five years of steep declines.

He is in good position to insist that students not see tuition and fee increases in the next couple of years.

But no one should be under the illusion of a return to higher education's glory days.

While Brown's budget proposal increases higher education a little, it does not get state funding for the UC and CSU systems back to where it was in 2007. It does, however, stop the bleeding.

The community colleges get close to 2007 funding, but the governor expects the community colleges to take on adult education, relieving K-12 schools of that responsibility.

In return for a slight increase in state funding, Brown wants public colleges and universities to focus more on getting students through college in timely fashion. That's the right goal.

He's also placing a big bet on achieving "efficiencies" through more use of online courses – particularly for high-demand introductory and lower-division course requirements. Online courses can help reduce the number of students shut out of courses and allow students to complete courses on their own schedule.

Specifically, Brown wants the community college system to create a single, common, centralized “virtual campus” for students to access online courses. He also wants students to be able to get credit by exam – which might be appropriate for transfer and remedial courses and, perhaps, courses taken through programs such as Udacity and Coursera.

As this discussion proceeds, the UC, CSU and community colleges should be attentive to quality, especially in the gateway courses for students exploring a major.

In his push to get students through school in timely fashion, Brown is proposing a hard cap on classes. Students who take more than 150 percent of the standard semester credit units required to earn a degree (or transfer in the case of community colleges) would be required to pay the full cost of instruction.

Before legislators sign on to this, they should take a hard look at why students are taking excess credits – and if a cap would actually prevent students from finishing on time. Other states encourage timely completion in less punitive ways, and legislators should explore them.

Overall, Brown’s higher education budget gives much-needed breathing space for a deeper discussion on the proper balance between the student contribution and state general fund contribution to a public college or university education.

And his personal involvement sends the right message that this is big, important stuff that California has to get right.