



Governor's budget seeks cost-cutting in higher education

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Headlines about Gov. Jerry Brown's newly proposed funding increase for higher education have largely focused on state-funded public colleges saying they won't raise tuition for the 2013-14 school year, a development cheered by students and parents alike.

Lesser known is that Brown also wants the University of California, California State University and community college systems to rein in costs, operate more efficiently and get students to obtain their diplomas more quickly.

In recommending more money for these colleges and calling on them to freeze tuition for four years, the governor outlined several ways to yield savings. Those include using technology to educate more students at a lower cost, shortening the time it takes to earn a degree and improving graduation rates.

"The phrase is deploy your teaching resources more effectively," Brown said during a news conference Thursday. "The point is, we want more kids to be able to get through school quicker without pushing up costs."

Some critics said they welcome Brown's push for efficiency but believe the state needs a much deeper review of its higher education systems to ensure they meet the needs of California's students and 21st-century economy.

"Most of the things that are on the budget that I've seen are ... constructive but modest initiatives," said Patrick Callan, president of the nonprofit Higher Education Policy Institute in San Jose. "I think the state has much bigger issues in higher education than that budget would suggest, and the kinds of initiative he is bringing to other areas — big systemic reforms — are missing here."

Callan and others view the state's approach to higher-education funding as shortsighted, although they acknowledge not having immediate recommendations on what a broad revamp of public colleges in the state should involve.

“My reaction was, here we go again. This is what happens after a recession because legislators and the governor are getting so much push-back about tuition from the public,” said Joni Finney, director of the Institute for Research in Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania. “It is politically a popular thing to do, but it is not a long-term plan.”

Finney, who spent 15 years in California studying and working on higher-education policy before moving to Pennsylvania, predicted that the next generation college students in the state would face even higher fee spikes after the proposed tuition freeze ends.

“It really kicks the ball down the road and California is great at that — of putting off current problems into the future,” Finney said. “What we really need is a finance plan and a master plan that really works in California for the next 20 or 30 years.”

Brown said in his budget summary that even though UC and CSU have pursued “administrative efficiencies” that reduced expenses, their overall spending increased and had to be offset by tuition and fee hikes. The result, he said, is that higher education in the state has become less and less affordable.

The governor said between 2007 and 2012, when other state agencies were making cuts, UC expenditures jumped by 15 percent and CSU expenditures rose by 3 percent. In that same period, UC tuition and fees went up by \$5,556, and the CSU figure increased by \$2,700.

“The UC, CSU and community colleges need to move aggressively to implement reforms to provide high-quality instruction at lower cost ... by deploying their teaching resources more effectively,” Brown wrote.

His proposed budget calls for general fund contributions to UC and CSU to increase by 5 percent per year in 2013-14 and 2014-15, and by 4 percent in each of the subsequent two years. Funding for community colleges would also go up by 5 percent in 2013-14 and likely grow more significantly over the next several years.

Among the changes sought by the governor:

- Expanding the delivery of courses through technology — Brown has allocated nearly \$17 million to community colleges and \$10 million each to the CSU and UC systems to boost the number of courses available for undergraduates through online learning and other technology. His budget proposal also calls for the creation of a “virtual campus” for community colleges that would offer more classes.

- Financial incentives for completing degrees — The governor is targeting so-called “super seniors,” or students who for one reason or another have spent years taking classes without getting their diploma. Fewer than 30 percent of degree-seeking students at community colleges complete a degree, earn a certificate or transfer within six years, while only 16 percent in the CSU system finish their degree program within four years. In the UC system, 60 percent obtain their degree in four years.

Brown is proposing that students be allowed to accrue no more than 150 percent of the standard units needed to complete most degrees. Those who exceed the unit caps would have to pay the full cost of instruction.

“This policy will encourage students to identify an educational goal and reach it in a timely and efficient way, focusing on the courses necessary to complete their educational goals while still allowing for some exploration of other subject areas,” Brown said in his budget summary.

The governor’s plan resembles a CSU blueprint to impose new fees that was postponed in November, at the governor’s request. At the time, CSU administrators said students with 160 semester units or more made up about 7 percent of the system’s seniors.

- Changing the way community colleges are funded — The governor wants to no longer base state funding on the number of students enrolled at the 20 percent mark of each class term. Instead, funding would be dependent on a student finishing the course. Brown said the switch, which would be phased in, would provide a greater incentive for community colleges to help students complete their classes. In addition, the governor proposed requiring more verification of financial need for students who receive fee waivers. Under the new system, students would have to fill out a federal application that includes both parent and student income.

The prospect of no immediate tuition hikes was welcome news for students at the University of California San Diego and San Diego State University, who have almost come to expect annual increases.

“I think it’s a step in the direction and gets us on the right track,” said Tom Rivera, vice president of external affairs for the Associated Students at SDSU. “I’ve been here for almost four years now and every single year we’ve seen some kind of fee increase, either at the beginning of the semester or somewhere in the middle of the year. It is very difficult for families and for students to plan for the increased costs.”

Zev Hurwitz, a sophomore majoring in communications at UC San Diego, said Brown’s proposed budget is a positive message, although he doesn’t trust that fees won’t be raised in the future.

“I’ve been here for a year and a half now, and this is the first time I’ve heard good news out of Sacramento,” said Hurwitz, adding that he has taken out “a modest amount of loans” to help pay for college and living expenses. “I’m cautiously optimistic about it. The more money that UC gets from the state, the better we are going to be in the long run. But I’m not convinced that everything is going to be OK.”