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Partnership for Learning

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PARTNERSHIP FOR LEARNING

by Richard C. Atkinson

Among all the other reasons to celebrate, students who are graduating this time of year from the nine University of California campuses and other institutions of higher learning can rejoice in the prospect of entering the brightest job market in a decade. Unfortunately, the California colleges and universities that helped bring them to this point are not facing quite so promising a future.

The 1990s brought higher education in this state a fiscal downturn that was deeper and more damaging than the Great Depression of the 1930s. Today the University of California's budget is about \$900 million less than it would have been if the State had been able to provide only normal cost increases--in other words, a bare-bones budget--in the early 1990s.

This staggering figure equals the entire 1995 State-funded budget for three of the University's nine campuses. Our faculty and staff received no salary increases for three consecutive years. And, as students and their families are painfully aware, student fees soared.

The good news is that, with the vigorous rebound of the California economy, we have some reason to be hopeful about the future. Assembly Speaker Cruz Bustamante has introduced the Higher Education Partnership Act of 1997, which would allow the University to maintain the stellar quality of its academic programs, continue to admit all eligible students, and keep any student fee increases moderate and predictable.

We hope the days of sudden and substantial student fee increases are behind us. And even at today's higher cost, a UC education remains one of the best bargains in the country. But students and their parents still have every right to ask: What return are students getting for their educational dollar at the University of California?

I could point to the distinction of the University's faculty and the quality of its academic programs, both of which are so extraordinary that several recent national studies have ranked UC first in the nation. But even distinguished research universities like UC are often criticized for the quality and character of their undergraduate teaching.

It is true that a large public university like UC has a higher student-faculty ratio than does a small liberal arts college. But our undergraduate students regularly give their courses and teachers very high marks indeed. Ratings of "excellent" or "very good" are common on all of our campuses, and our largest classes earn just about as high a rating as our smallest.

It should not really be surprising that so many young people find a research university a congenial place in which to learn. The students entering the University today are the best prepared in history. They are entrusted to us during what is, for many of them, one of the most critical and intellectually passionate periods of their lives.

The process of education should help them focus their curiosity and enthusiasm and bring them into contact with the rigor and objectivity that are essential to the life of the mind. A research university, which is full of bright individuals with their own passionate commitments to learning, is a wonderful place in which to pursue such an education.

Our undergraduates have the opportunity to engage in supervised research and to learn in an environment of discovery from professors who are on the cutting edge of new developments, many of them revolutionary in their implications. The University of California, for example, is the birthplace of the Internet, having created the first two nodes on the information superhighway at UCLA and UC Santa Barbara in the late 1960s. Students have a broader range of academic options than students at many other kinds of institutions.

As a result, they have superb opportunities to acquire what might be called the grammar of learning--the intellectual skills and problem-solving discipline that can be applied to learning virtually anything. Every student who masters this grammar has the foundation on which future learning can be built.

So the students who are graduating with such high hopes leave the University prepared not only for a career. They are prepared for a life.

The question facing us as citizens is whether we are doing enough to ensure that the colleges and universities that have helped these talented young people succeed will be able to do the same for their children and grandchildren. Some of the economic clouds hanging over higher education have dispersed, but sunny skies have not yet come to California's public colleges and universities.