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California Higher Education, The Next 50 Years

It occurs every year. No matter how the budget turns out, higher education needs more money. It is the annual rite of spring in higher education all across our nation. Everyone says it – college presidents, trustees, regents, faculty, politicians, and students. We even encourage students to become apoplectic about tuitions increases.

Unfortunately, this discussion usually comes down to more money for teachers. If we had more money for teachers, we could do the job. “How much more money do you need” someone asks, “more than last year” is the reply. This exchange is unfortunate because the heavy in this spring drama is neither teachers nor teacher salaries. The villain in this production is the manner in which we have allowed ourselves to organize into a dysfunctional higher education system that spends more than it needs. It no longer does a good job of serving the needs of students, taxpayers, or the state. All the actors in this drama are responsible for this outcome.

In many ways, this annual argument reminds me of the 40 years of debate between the United Auto Workers and General Motors, Chrysler, and Ford. Management (think administrators here) would blame the worker (think teacher). The worker would blame management. The consumer (think student) would move to a more fuel efficient, well made automobile made in another country (think private not-for-profit and for-profit colleges here). While we watched this argument unfold, we all wondered why we could not compete with foreign automakers.

What lessons have we learned from our recent history? The American auto industry did not have a clear vision of the future and its purpose. It ignored environmental signals sent by consumers and governments.

The result has not been pretty. Some companies have failed. The government now owns a carmaker. The foreign automakers now reside in the United States. The workforce is smaller, paid well, and technology is a major factor with the common thread of providing the consumer a quality product.

Are there parallels between the higher education industry and the auto industry? In Detroit, you found Chrysler, GM, and Ford. In California you find the University of California, California State University, and California Community College systems. We have large workforces and require a significant portion of the state budget to operate. Politicians, agencies and unions control us and we are losing market share to competitors.

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There is hope. Recently in California, the Legislative Analyst's Office produced a document that has only had a cursory glance by the politicians, editorial boards, and the candidates for governor. The document is **The Master Plan at 50: Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts – Coordinating Higher Education in California.**

Its authors state that for decades we have allowed the higher education system in California to go relatively unchecked by the politicians, which has resulted in a higher education system that *“worked well during several decades of expansion, producing arguably the greatest higher education system in the world. The effectiveness of this approach has declined over the last quarter century, however, and institutions have been left to pursue their separate interest with insufficient mechanisms to advance the state’s priorities.”*

The reviewers put forth a few examples of where our effectiveness has declined:

- Public universities have expanded costly programs that are not high priorities for the state that are restricting undergraduate enrollment.
- Students experience ongoing difficulties transferring from two-year to four-year colleges. California is failing in its attempt to simplify the transfer process.
- There is increased duplication of programs across segments, and evidence of growing institutional, local and regional political influence at the expense of statewide planning.

The legislature and next governor need to address stronger coordination of all systems (CC, CSU, UC) at the state level, provide incentives with current dollars to fund early completion to degree at all segments, provide more local control at the community college level for differential tuition and fees, and consolidate our pensions systems.

So are we listening? Are we ready to make substantive changes to preserve what was arguably the best higher education system in the world, or will we ignore the road signs and drive this bloated, gas guzzling bureaucracy off the proverbial cliff?

West Hills Community College District serves the west side of the San Joaquin Valley and is part of the California Community College System. Its two colleges, West Hills College Coalinga, which includes North District Center, Firebaugh, and West Hills College Lemoore, serve more than 7,000 students on campus and online each semester.