

Don't neglect higher education

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As our state's leaders wrestle with a very difficult state budget challenge this year, the colleges and universities of the valley need to be a central priority.

Economic growth and an educated workforce are both tied directly to the work of our state's three systems of public higher education. The California Community Colleges, the California State University system, and the University of California system not only expand opportunity for the students they enroll, the three systems contribute to the economy, health and quality of life for literally every Californian.

Perhaps nowhere is sustaining this positive impact more crucial than in the valley. Thanks in large part to regional collaboration through the California Partnership for the San Joaquin Valley and the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium, we are making real progress on many of the critical issues facing the valley — economic diversification, improved health care, higher college-going rates, better workforce preparation. But investment in our colleges and universities must continue, or that progress will simply falter.

As it stands today, the state budget under discussion in Sacramento underfunds the true needs of public higher education by several hundred million dollars. If that underfunding is sustained in the final budget, the most immediate impact will be felt by students on our campuses — in availability of classes, student services, class sizes and other program impacts.

But it won't be long before the impact is felt more broadly. Industries that drive the valley's economic opportunities and hopes rely on the region's colleges for research to encourage entrepreneurship and innovation, and to train workers from managers to technicians across a range of businesses. We all rely on the nurses, teachers, engineers and firefighters who are educated in our colleges and universities. And all valley residents rely on higher education to pursue new solutions to such collective challenges as air quality, water development and food safety to name a few.

The challenge in this year's state budget has to do not only with operating budgets, but funding for facilities, as well. It's unclear right now whether the state will authorize bond funding for new higher education facilities and building improvements. Those projects are critical if our colleges and universities are to deliver on their mission.

There are many worthy programs in the state budget, and all parts of the state need to play a role in this year's budget solution — including higher education. But as our state's leaders make funding decisions, it is important for them to recognize that one-year decisions about education funding have impacts for many years.

And when the economy is struggling, higher education actually is an investment in recovery. Research shows that for every \$1 invested in a student's higher education, the state's economy receives a net \$3 return on investment. In today's economy, our colleges and universities are one of the best investments we have.

Cheri Cruz is executive director of the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium, which includes Kern County. Community Voices is an expanded commentary that may contain up to 500 words. The Californian reserves the right to reprint commentaries in all formats, including on its Web page.