UCR Chancellor: Proposed budget for 2011-12 was filled with pain for all Californians

Governor Jerry Brown’s proposed budget for 2011-12 was filled with pain for all Californians, a reflection of the sad financial condition in which we find our state.

Notable among the drastic cuts he proposed were $500 million each for the University of California and California State University, and $400 million for the California Community Colleges. This additional year of crippling reductions will unavoidably affect our ability to admit, let alone serve, the students who have been placed in our trust.

With unemployment rates still hovering just below 15% in Riverside and San Bernardino counties, it’s easy to understand why this matters incredibly for Inland Southern California. In this moment of economic crisis, it would be penny-wise and pound-foolish to decrease investment in higher education, which is the only way out of the predicament in which we find ourselves today.

Among the dire problems we face in our region, the lack of educational attainment must remain at or near the top of the list for our local and state elected leaders. In Riverside County, 19% of residents have earned degrees beyond high school; in San Bernardino County the figure is 14%. Compare that with the national average of 28%, and one quickly concludes that we are at a significant, strategic disadvantage – a crippling disadvantage that will linger until we improve educational attainment of our residents.

This fact has implications for how we re-build our struggling local economy. The economic forecast released last fall by the UC Riverside School of Business Administration predicts several more years of hard times before we see the recovery the rest of the nation may soon glimpse.

Our long-term strategy must focus on business diversification, workforce development, and job creation for a knowledge-based workforce. With a school of medicine preparing
to launch and the largest undergraduate enrollment in our history, UC Riverside will be a key partner with Southern California in making progress in those critical directions.

The most recent data show that UC Riverside has a direct and indirect financial impact on the region totaling $1 billion. This from an annual investment of approximately $270 million from the State of California. That multiplier effect derives from the economic activity we generate through our mission of research, teaching and service.

Each dollar pulled out of the University of California budget exerts a proportional, exponential contraction on our local economy. And as we continue to accelerate the licensing of intellectual property of our faculty and attract investors for start-up companies, our role as an economic stimulus only increases.

No one would argue that these are not challenging times, and that difficult decisions must be made. But the future of Inland Southern California depends on our collective ability to maintain a sharp focus on our future, and not put the dreams and aspirations of our young people at risk.

The key to a prosperous future is education, and we must all commit ourselves to improving and enhancing our children’s access to the attainment of this vital resource.

I ask our friends and neighbors throughout the region to remember that UC Riverside is part of the University for California, for its people, economy, environment, education, nutritious and safe food supply, healthcare, safety, culture, arts and humanities, social progress and quality of life.

The University for California is for the hopes, dreams and promise of first generation immigrants and multi-generational Californians. The University for California is for our future.

*Timothy P. White is Chancellor of the University of California, Riverside.*