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Mark G. Yudof: Our future: Human capital

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I'm a newcomer to California. I've been here seven months now. But throughout my life, whether I was in Pennsylvania, Minnesota or Texas, the state of California always held a special place in the public mind. It represented promise and upward mobility. It represented a better life. It represented the future.

Sunshine, beaches and movie stars had something to do with that, I suppose. But more important to the creation of California's position of leadership in America and around the world was its investment in the development of its greatest resource – its "human capital."

Fifty years ago, Gov. Pat Brown, University of California President Clark Kerr and others launched a bold period of investment in California's infrastructure. Highways and waterways were key pieces of it. Perhaps most critical was the creation of a framework for public higher education – UC, California State University and the community colleges – that became the envy of the world.

The students who came to these colleges and universities benefited as individuals, of course. They got the opportunity to receive a world-class education at an affordable price. But the benefit actually extended to all people of the state.

Graduates of our public colleges became the backbone of a highly skilled work force, the most important "technology transfer" of all. Innovations developed at our research universities led to new products, new industries and new jobs in those industries.

Over time, breakthroughs in such fields as biotechnology, information technology and health care transformed the economies of entire regions of the state.

And these successes drew more creative, inventive people to California to participate in new waves of growth and discovery. They're the people who are working on more-powerful batteries to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels, pursuing stem cell research to end the scourge of diseases, developing improvements to agricultural productivity and countless other innovations.

California is still a land of hope and promise. But as we look to the future and grapple with the financial difficulties of the present, we need to confront reality. And the reality is that California today is living off the investments of 50 years ago. The commitment to investment in our human infrastructure has waned.

In my institution, the University of California, the state's per-student investment in

education, adjusted for inflation and enrollment growth, has fallen 40 percent in less than 20 years. The proportion of revenue the state devotes to higher education overall has fallen substantially as other public needs have expanded.

That matters to middle-class students and families who have had to stretch further and further to pay college-tuition bills. And it should matter to Californians who want a future with a thriving economy and a quality of life of the kind they have enjoyed in the past.

Getting out of the economic slump requires many things that are under consideration or have been implemented by our state and federal governments.

But, ultimately, it means investing in human infrastructure again. It means giving people the tools to be creative and productive for society. That requires investment in public education at all levels.

Public education, including public higher education, of course needs to demonstrate the return it provides on the public's investment. It needs to save money and create efficiencies wherever possible. It needs to be accountable for its use of taxpayer money.

But our state's schools, colleges and universities need to be given the support to fuel its economic resurgence. Not a handout; not a bailout. An investment in human capital that will benefit all Californians – and ensure California remains a place where promise is realized.

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