



# Back to the Master Plan: Why CFA advocates for accessible, quality, and free public higher education

**By Jennifer Eagan**

President, California Faculty Association  
Philosophy and Public Affairs & Administration, CSU East Bay

**F**or so many years, people around the California Faculty Association have talked about and carried banners declaring that everyone should have access to quality public higher education and that it should be free for all.

Today, several states are rolling out proposals to make higher education tuition free or debt free, competing to make their state the leader in public higher education. The conversation, including here in California, has moved from thinking that free and accessible higher education is a utopian dream planning for how to make it a reality.

Free public higher education is now in the public consciousness and the public debate. That's a seismic shift.

CFA has been at the forefront of the discussion of accessible, quality, and genuinely public higher education, and we're exploring the issue further. Since we teach and work in the biggest public four-year higher education system in the U.S., it makes sense to draw from the extraordinary history of the California State University system and the policy from which it was built, and to decide how to shape its future going forward.

Last March, the CFA Assembly adopted a resolution which asserts that the CSU, being an accessible and quality public institution, must assume the burden for providing that quality and access, rather than putting the cost on the backs of students and their families.

*CFA resolved to support efforts to:*

*Secure clear, unfettered, and tuition free access for all CSU students eligible under the California Master Plan for Higher Education—both undergraduate and graduate; and to*

*Maintain high quality education in the CSU; and to*

*Ensure that each CSU student graduate at a pace that accords*

*with their personal goals, without debt, and ready to embark on their career path as an educated and highly skilled Californian who can serve the needs of the state*

—California Faculty Association Resolution Supporting Free Public Higher Education in the CSU, adopted March 11, 2017

Collectively, our Assembly established the need to go back to the California Master Plan for Higher Education, which proclaimed that public higher education was necessary for the health of the state and its citizens. The CSU cannot be genuinely public when so much of the burden of its cost is borne



by students. Current students don't have access if quality is reduced by persistent defunding. Quality education requires state investment that cannot be replaced by student fees or private contributions.

With these principles in place, we have been digging deeper. How do these "free" higher education plans stack up in the real world? What does "free" mean in terms of policy?

### What we mean when we say free higher education

To restore our university system, we need a two-pronged strategy, and a two-part fight. We need to focus on both restoring funding to our public higher education system AND ensuring the quality of that education. We need to make public higher education free of tuition and fees in California and include the financial support students need to live and learn at the same time.

We mean significant reinvestment in public higher education that takes the burden off students and restores access to and the quality of public higher education.

It certainly can be done. California used to provide free quality higher education, and other countries do so now. The question is how to do it. There are some promising options already out there.

We can credit Bernie Sanders for making free higher education a part of his presidential campaign and for introducing the College for All Act, which calls for a significant federal investment in public higher education with matching dollars from the states that must be used both to make college accessible and free for students and to reinvest dollars into instruction.

Another promising proposal can be found in "The \$48 Fix: Reclaiming California Master Plan for Higher Education." The Reclaim Coalition proposes to return to California's Master Plan by restoring per-pupil state funding to what it was in the year 2000 for both the CSU and UC and by eliminating tuition and fees in all public higher education in California. These dual goals would be accomplished with a reasonable, progressive tax that averages \$48 a year per household.

Both of these proposals contain the key to any worthy plan for accessible, quality,

and free public higher education—a mechanism for investing more public money into the system.

In addition to funding the system and eliminating tuition and fees, free higher education plans also should address support for cost of living while in school in order to create meaningful access for students. We are talking not just about tuition-free and debt-free public higher education, but plans that support students' ability to support themselves while they attend school.

Any plan that does not simultaneously address funding to public college and university systems, elimination of tuition, and failure to address the real lived experience of our students, ultimately fails to create the systemic change that we need. Plans that merely restructure existing grants and financial aid, like New York's Tuition-Free Degree Program, sound good yet fail because they do not restore much-needed public funding to the system. A really transformative plan cannot simply rearrange

deck chairs on the sinking ship; it has to fix the hole and restore health to the vessel.

CFA is advocating for a system that is truly accessible, high-quality, and free for everyone. Complicated, expensive, and difficult-to-administer means-testing schemes tend to shut out students who have trouble navigating the system. Any fees or tuition charged to California residents and their families demand that people who have been paying taxes in California for decades pay yet again for the degrees that the state needs to have a strong economy and create promise for everyone's future.

### Why We Can't Wait

If we do not seriously address the human costs of increased student tuition and fees, increased cost of living, and reduced financial aid on real students—OUR students—then we are abdicating our duty as faculty members.



In her analysis of the collapse of our nation's more than 50-year-old financial aid system, Sara Goldrick-Rab writes:

*Reiterating the myth that college is affordable perpetuates inequality... It also encourages educators and policymakers to think that students' financial situations are not affecting their performance. If graduation rates are too low, the problem must lie with students themselves or with their colleges. If there is a crisis in America's college system, it must be, we are told, all about the students and the youth culture, the teaching and the advising, the remediation and the standards. Because, in effect, we believe what financial models seem to tell us: even when we provide Pell Grants that are supposed to cover college costs, low-income students still do not finish college.*

—Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream, pp. 235-6

We are obligated to follow the evidence in order to help our students. The evidence reveals that if we want our students to complete their degrees at their fastest personal pace, we need to release them from the financial burdens that slow them down.

The fact is our students are straining under the weight of an economic system and a set of policy decisions that have narrowed their possibilities. In addition to others' work, CFA's own research, contained in a series of papers we have called "Equity Interrupted," has shown that the 30-year systemic defunding of the CSU, along with steady increases in student fees, has disproportionately impacted students of color.

Only real policy change in how we fund public college and university systems will lift the burden from our students and allow them to succeed.

What's more, restoring the Master Plan is how California will attain the 1.1 million more Californians with baccalaureate degrees by the year 2030, that the Public Policy Institute of California's research shows is critical to the state's economic viability. Short-cuts will not produce the results we need.

If we fail to act, if we do not do what we can to restore the Master Plan now, if we

burden more students with debt, then we sabotage our students' success and the success of the California economy.

Tuition-free and fee-free public higher education, joined by restored funding to our public university system that respects the true situation of our students, —that is how we will get back on track.

As educators and faculty leaders, we have a responsibility to speak out on what we know to be true. We can't wait to save public higher education, to restore funding to the CSU, and to help our students. The consequences of waiting are too great. Each of our students has this one and only life to learn, thrive, and create a future. They need and deserve our best effort right now. ■

## California Master Plan for Higher Education

The Master Plan created California's three-segment public higher education system to serve all of California's students regardless of their economic status. The California State University, the University of California, and the California Community Colleges have turned out millions of graduates over the 57 years since the system was launched, and that has been key to California's success as the sixth largest economy in the world.

Learn more about the Master Plan at [www.ucop.edu/acadinitt/mastplan](http://www.ucop.edu/acadinitt/mastplan)

### RELATED LINKS

#### CFA President Jennifer Eagan's TEDx talk, May 2013

"Public Higher Education is a Human Right"

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmD2jDL-nvl](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmD2jDL-nvl)

#### CFA Resolution Supporting Free Public Higher Education in the CSU

[www.calfac.org/item/california-faculty-association-resolution-supporting-free-public-higher-education-csu](http://www.calfac.org/item/california-faculty-association-resolution-supporting-free-public-higher-education-csu)

#### College for All Act proposed by Bernie Sanders

[www.sanders.senate.gov/download/collegeforall/?inline=file](http://www.sanders.senate.gov/download/collegeforall/?inline=file)

#### "The \$48 Fix: Reclaiming California Master Plan for Higher Education"

[48fix.org](http://48fix.org)

#### Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream

Sara Goldrick-Rab, University of Chicago Press, 2016

Reviews at [press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/P/bo24663096.html](http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/P/bo24663096.html)

#### CFA Research: "Equity Interrupted: How California is Cheating its Future"

[www.calfac.org/equity-interrupted](http://www.calfac.org/equity-interrupted)

#### Public Policy Institute of California: "State Faces Shortfall of 1.1 Million College Graduates in 2030; Expanding Access to UC and CSU, Increasing Community College Transfers Can Help Close Gap"

[www.ppic.org/press-release/state-faces-shortfall-of-1-1-million-college-graduates-in-2030/](http://www.ppic.org/press-release/state-faces-shortfall-of-1-1-million-college-graduates-in-2030/)