California's higher-education debacle

Watching the decline of the California State University system from within its boardroom mirrors the erosion of the California dream.

By Jeff Bleich

November 4, 2009

For nearly six years, I have served on the Board of Trustees of the California State University system -- the last two as its chairman. This experience has been more than just professional; it has been a deeply personal one. With my term ending soon, I need to share my concern -- and personal pain -- that California is on the verge of destroying the very system that once made this state great.

I came to California because of the education system. I grew up in Connecticut and attended college back East on partial scholarships and financial aid. I also worked part time, but by my first year of grad school, I'd maxed out my financial aid and was relying on loans that charged 14% interest. Being a lawyer had been my dream, but my wife and I could not afford for me to go to any law schools back East. I applied to UC Berkeley Law School because it was the only top law school in the U.S. that we could afford. It turned out to be the greatest education I have ever received. And I got it because the people of California -- its leaders and its taxpayers -- were willing to invest in me. For the last 20 years, since I graduated, I have felt a duty to pay back the people of this state. When I had to figure out where to build a practice, buy a home, raise my family and volunteer my time and
energy, I chose California. I joined a small California firm -- Munger, Tolles & Olson -- and eventually became a partner. This year, American Lawyer magazine named us the No. 1 firm in the nation. That success is also California's success. It has meant millions of dollars in taxes paid to California, hundreds of thousands of hours of volunteer time donated to California, houses built and investments made in California, and hundreds of talented people attracted to work in and help California. My story is not unique. It is the story of California's rise from the 1960s to the 1990s. Millions of people stayed here and succeeded because of their California education. We benefited from the foresight of an earlier generation that recognized it had a duty to pay it forward. That was the bargain California made with us when it established the California Master Plan for Higher Education in 1960. By making California the state where every qualified and committed person can receive a low-cost and high-quality education, all of us benefit. Attracting and retaining the leaders of the future helps the state grow bigger and stronger. Economists found that for every dollar the state invests in a CSU student, it receives $4.41 in return. So as someone who has lived the California dream, there is nothing more painful to me than to see this dream dying. It is being starved to death by a public that thinks any government service -- even public education -- is not worth paying for. And by political leaders who do not lead but instead give in to our worst, shortsighted instincts. The ineffective response to the current financial crisis reflects trends that have been hurting California public education for years. To win votes, political leaders mandated long prison sentences that forced us to stop building schools and start building prisons. This has made us dumber but no safer. Leaders pandered by promising tax cuts no matter what and did not worry about how to provide basic services without that money. Those tax cuts did not make us richer; they've made us poorer. To remain in office, they carved out legislative districts that ensured we would have few competitive races and leaders with no ability or incentive to compromise. Rather than strengthening the parties, it pushed both parties to the fringes and weakened them. When the economy was good, our leaders failed to make hard choices and then faced disasters like the energy crisis. When the economy turned bad, they made no choices until the economy was worse. In response to failures of leadership, voters came up with one cure after another that was worse than the disease -- whether it has
been over-reliance on initiatives driven by special interests, or term limits that remove qualified people from office, or any of the other ways we have come up with to avoid representative democracy. As a result, for the last two decades we have been starving higher education. California's public universities and community colleges have half as much to spend today as they did in 1990 in real dollars. In the 1980s, 17% of the state budget went to higher education and 3% went to prisons. Today, only 9% goes to universities and 10% goes to prisons. The promise of low-cost education that brought so many here, and kept so many here, has been abandoned. Our K-12 system has fallen from the top ranks 30 years ago to 47th in the nation in per-pupil spending. And higher education is now taking on water. At every trustees meeting over the last six years, I have seen the signs of decline. I have listened to the painful stories of faculty who could not afford to raise a family on their salaries; of students who are on the financial edge because they are working two jobs, taking care of a child and barely making it with our current tuitions. I have seen the outdated buildings and the many people on our campuses who feel that they have been forgotten by the public and Sacramento. What made California great was the belief that we could solve any problem as long as we did two things: acknowledged the problem and worked together. Today that belief is missing. California has not acknowledged that it has fundamentally abandoned the promise of the Master Plan for Higher Education. And Californians have lost the commitment to invest in one another. That is why we have lost our way in decision after decision. Today, everyone in our system is making terrible sacrifices. Employee furloughs, student fee increases and campus-based cuts in service and programs are repulsive to all of us. Most important, it is unfair. The cost of education should be shared by all of us because the education of our students benefits every Californian. We've gone from investing in the future to borrowing from it. Every time programs and services are cut for short-term gain, it is a long-term loss. The solution is simple, but hard. It is what I'm doing now. Tell what is happening to every person who can hear it. Beat this drum until it can't be ignored. Shame your neighbors who think the government needs to be starved and who are happy to see Sacramento paralyzed. We have to wake up this state and get it to rediscover its greatness. Because if we don't, we will be the generation that let the promise for a great California die. Jeff Bleich is the chairman of the Cal State University
Board of Trustees and most recently served as special counsel to President Obama. This is adapted from his speech to the board.