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### EDUCATORS ANTICIPATE ANSWERS HINGING ON GOVERNOR'S BUDGET; 1960 PROMISE OF HIGHER EDUCATION ALREADY HAS BEEN STRAINED BY FEE HIKES

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger will take an important midterm exam today, and California's college educators will be strict proctors.

The governor's proposed budget, scheduled for release today, will answer several multiple-choice questions about the near future of California's higher-education systems. For one, is there any hope of keeping the state's 1960 promise to provide a college education to all qualified residents?

This decade's budget problems have already strained that promise to its limits, and higher-education supporters say any more funding cuts could leave nearly 2 million Californians unable to attend college in the next 10 years.

"If we turn our back on these students, that's a serious risk to the state," said Abdi Soltani, executive director of the Campaign for College Opportunity. "This investment pays back so many times."

Californians appear to share his belief. A poll of 800 California voters that was released last week by Soltani's group shows 82 percent believe the state should increase funding to state colleges and universities.

But California's persistent budget deficits have severely tested the state's commitment to higher education. Schwarzenegger and others have proposed using community colleges to help handle the impending flood of college-age residents, but budget cuts have hampered that plan.

Educators and students are wondering what ever became of the 1960 Master Plan, which promised Californians a college education.

"We are still committed to that dream," said Assemblywoman Carol Liu, D-La Canada Flintridge, who chairs the Assembly Higher Education Committee. "It's just more difficult with the resources we have."

Community-college administrators already know they won't receive as much state funding this year as they had expected, because the governor has said he will not abide by funding-increase requirements of 1988's Proposition 98, which covers K-12 schools and community colleges.

But administrators at the 23-campus California State University and the 10-campus University of California spent the weekend nervously awaiting today's budget proposal.

The governor's office would not comment on its plans, and a Finance Department spokesman did not return calls Friday.

In May, Schwarzenegger signed agreements with Cal State and UC leaders that guaranteed annual funding increases. Those compacts called for 3 percent boosts for two years, followed by 4-percent increases the next four years.

Now, with the first year of the agreement approaching, some administrators and experts are skeptical.

"I'm not at all confident that the guarantee means anything," said Nancy Shulock, executive director of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy at Cal State Sacramento. "Where's the money going to come from?"

That same question continues to haunt students, who have watched their fees skyrocket the past two years. It's a far cry from the \$75-per-semester fee Liu paid in 1959, her first year at UC Berkeley.

"We need to make sure (higher fees do) not keep students from attending college," she said. "This state didn't become the sixth-largest nation-state by failing to educate our young people."

After a recession and fee increases in the early 1990s kept more than 100,000 Californians from attending college, the technology gold rush stuffed the state's coffers in the late '90s.

"It doesn't look like this recession is going to be followed by a financial boom like it was before," said Joni Finney, vice president of the National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education. "It's really creating a workforce problem down the road."

In 20 years, higher education's portion of California's budget has fallen sharply, leaving students wondering what's in store for future students.

"I would think you would want these generations well -prepared, as opposed to collecting unemployment and being a burden," said Miguel Castaneda, a graduate student at Cal State Hayward's Concord campus. "I can't understand why this isn't a priority here."

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