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Viewpoints: To cut costs, send inmates to college

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's budget plan has drawn attention to a shocking reversal in state spending priorities over the last generation. Three decades ago, 10.1 percent of the state's general fund was allocated to higher education, 3.4 percent to prisons.

Today, prisons receive almost 11 percent of the budget, whereas higher education has dropped to 7.5 percent.

This reversal reflects a change in the state's investment strategy, from educating the next generation of workers to locking them up.

Given the unlikelihood of legislators increasing taxes, we might consider how a solution might be found in the connection between higher education and the prison system. Simply put, admission to the former is perhaps the best deterrent for sentencing to the latter. It will also save lots of money.

The state currently spends \$48,214 per prisoner, yet it only spends \$7,463 per student in the UC and CSU systems. Imagine if the governor pardoned the state's 168,000 prisoners and then enrolled them in a four-year college. There would be an immediate savings of \$6.8 billion per year.

Clearly such a proposal is impractical. The UC and CSU are not equipped to bring on so many additional students. And, frankly, some prisoners are too dangerous to release into society, let alone higher education.

But let's imagine that 10 percent of the prison population consists of nonviolent offenders who have an aptitude for higher education and could become contributing members of society. What if these prisoners were converted to college students? There would be an immediate annual savings of \$536 million.

Assuming my plan were to be implemented, conversion from prisoner to college student should not be a free ride. These new students should be expected to maintain good grades and behavior, otherwise they would be returned to prison. And once they graduate and enter the work force, they should be required to pay back the public monies used for their education, like a student loan.

So, if the governor and legislature are serious about cutting costs (which seems to be their only tool for dealing with the budget crisis), then here is a simple method for reducing costs,

supporting higher education, and lowering recidivism.

Let's face it: Current expenditures do not add up to a good investment in terms of desired outcomes. California has by far the highest per-inmate incarceration costs, yet it also has the highest recidivism rate in the nation. Seven out of 10 parolees end up back in jail within three years. In this case, increased spending has not increased public safety, nor has it increased parolees' successful return to society.

On the education front, California ranks 47th in terms of per-student spending, or about 20 percent below the national average. Not surprisingly, California also sends fewer high school graduates to college (about 6 percent below the national average), a fact that will result in a shortage of 1 million workers for California jobs requiring a college degree over the next 15 years. Here, less money equals fewer college graduates entering the work force.

We can, and must, do better on both fronts.

As UC President Mark Yudof has noted, "Having the best prison system in the world is not going to create jobs the way having the best university system will." California does not have the best prison system in the world, let alone the nation, just the most expensive.

If California is going to reduce recidivism and increase the number of college graduates, it will need to look more closely at its spending priorities. What, exactly, do we want to invest in for the future? Ironically, my modest proposal would work, because higher education is a surefire investment in human potential, an investment that is repaid many times over by the contributions made by alumni. But California has been heading in the other direction: cutting higher education, increasing prison spending, and thereby condemning the next generation.

The fact that I can even make this proposal shows the degree to which our state's spending priorities are out of whack. The state spends 6.5 times more on a prisoner than it does on a college student going to UCLA, one of the best universities in the world. Even when one adds all the expenses paid by the student and not the state – fees, room and board, books – the cost of prison is still almost 2.5 times more than being enrolled at UCLA.

Put another way, California could send every last prisoner to a UC campus, covering all expenses, and still save nearly \$2.3 billion per year. That's not right.

As the governor himself explained, "Spending 45 percent more on prisons than universities is no way to proceed into the future. What does it say about a state that focuses more on prison uniforms than caps and gowns? It simply is not healthy."

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