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Professor's Perspective: Despite cuts in budget, diversity should be UC's goal

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Today, public education in California is facing one of its biggest challenges as the state government considers severe budget cuts in order to cover a \$34.6 billion deficit. These cuts come as student enrollment is increasing, thereby putting more pressure on the educational system and creating a climate that is even more hostile to an equitable sharing of resources. Indeed, budget cuts come as California becomes increasingly diverse, particularly among the student-age population.

Racial minority groups now make up 53 percent of the general population, but they account for a much larger percentage of youth and young adults. Latinos alone account for nearly 50 percent of children now entering the California school system (and 61 percent in Los Angeles). Minority groups combined constitute 64 percent of college-age adults. But if one looks at the University of California, the state's flagship institution for higher education and research, minority access drops nearly ten percent for undergraduates (53.6 percent enrollment) and nearly thirty percent for graduate students (37 percent enrollment). For faculty, the disparities are even more dramatic, with minority groups comprising just 19.1 percent of tenure-track faculty, less than half their representation within the California workforce.

These numbers present clear and unequivocal signs that our public universities have failed to serve, let alone reflect, the entire state population. Now that the going has gotten tough, the programs that addressed this failure look to be the first to be sacrificed: outreach programs, ethnic studies research and teaching, and diversity initiatives. Of course, with a few notable exceptions, public officials support racial diversity and integration across our social institutions. But, as President George W. Bush recently declared with respect to affirmative action in higher education, such diversity must be sought through non-racial means. Seeking diversity through non-racial means is like seeking wealth through non-financial means, health through non-medical means and knowledge through non-educational means.

We're being asked to pursue a fundamental social value without a real commitment of public resources--that is, without a real chance of succeeding. Higher education has been the focus of the debates over racial diversity because college represents the gateway to the best our society has to offer, be it quality of life, professional standing, or the ability to influence and shape our society. Ideally, this gateway should be open to everyone, provided they do their homework. But we know that is not true. There is already a thumb on the scale. Students from well-funded high schools with an array of advance placement courses not found in low-income, minority schools can actually have extra points added to their grade point averages. At some colleges, children of alumni and donors are given special consideration beyond their academic merits. These and other policies regularly undermine racial diversity and social equity, but few complain.

By the end of the decade, UC enrollments will increase by as much as 60,000 new students. This increase will require up to 3,000 new faculty positions over the same time period. Here is a silver lining in the state budget crisis. While \$370 million will be cut from the UC's budget next year, another \$117 million will be added to hire new faculty. But will the racial minority groups that make up the largest part of the state population benefit from this growth, or will the disparities result in an educational apartheid? With thoughtful allocation of new faculty positions, the UC can actually increase its ability to serve the entire state population. What we need is a critical mass of faculty whose research and teaching advances the understanding of the state's diversity. Then the UC will be able to provide an intellectual environment that attracts, nurtures, and prepares all students for the new century.

In 2001, UC President Richard C. Atkinson aptly described this issue: "Continued academic excellence will require increased attention to issues such as multiculturalism, economic opportunity and educational equity to ensure that they are reflected strongly in the University's teaching, curriculum and research." In the end California will be judged not by its ideals about education and diversity, but by the way it allocates resources to make them a reality for all groups.

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