



## Education establishment at odds over community college initiative

By Michelle Locke (AP)

The fight over higher education dollars in California is moving to the ballot box with Proposition 92, an initiative designed to pump up community college funding.

The measure would lower fees and change the way money is allocated. Supporters say it is needed to protect the state's huge community college system and will net a payback of a smarter, higher-earning work force.

"The best deal in higher education in America is a couple of years at a California community college," said Scott Lay, head of the Community College League of California, a nonprofit association of the state's 72 community college districts, which is supporting the measure.

Opponents say the initiative does not come with controls on how the money would be spent, and, because it also doesn't come with a dedicated revenue source, would siphon money away from other institutions. That's a particular concern in light of the state's projected multibillion-dollar deficit, which has led Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to call for 10 percent cuts across all state programs.

The governor and other critics of the state's budgeting process say California's boom-and-bust cycle is in part caused by programs that lock in funding increases each year, even if revenue to state government declines. Many of those spending programs have been passed through voter initiatives, such as Proposition 92, without specifying how the state will pay for them.

Lay doesn't deny there are problems in California's budgeting system. But since that's the way education dollars are doled out, he said it's only fair that community colleges get their share.

"For the last 20 years, our opponents have been supporting formulas that provide revenue to high-priority programs at the cost of community colleges," he said. "We believe that it's time for community colleges to be recognized and funded accordingly."

The California Federation of Teachers supports the measure. Leaders of the University of California and California State University systems, as well as the California Teachers Association, are in the "no" camp.

"The sad thing about this is that it doesn't represent a plan for higher education in California," said Mary Gill, consultant to the No on Proposition 92 campaign. "Here we have one segment trying to get money at the expense of the other two segments."

Sean Yee, a student at City College of San Francisco, said he does not want to see any cuts in higher education funding, but "really, the people that need the help most are community college students."

California's community college system is the nation's largest, with 109 campuses and 2.5 million students. At one time it was free, but fees rose as the state's economy waned, hitting a high of \$26 per unit before dropping back to the current \$20.

Proposition 92, which goes before voters Feb. 5, would reduce community college fees to \$15 per unit and limit fee increases in the future. Currently, fees are waived for about one-quarter of students who are low-income.

It also changes the way education dollars are divided.

Under California law, the state has to provide a minimum level of support for K-12 schools and community colleges, using a formula tied to changes in the economy and K-12 attendance.

Under Proposition 92, the K-12 funding formula would stay the same, but community college funding would be tied to a new growth factor based on the young adult population. That group is expected to grow faster than K-12 attendance.

The nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office estimates the initiative would require the state to spend about \$300 million more a year on K-14 education during the first three years. The office estimates about half the increased funding would go to K-12 schools in the first two years, with more money going to community colleges in the third year. After that, it's unclear what would happen.

About two weeks before the election, supporters were reporting about \$3 million in contributions; opponents had about \$2 million. Given the state's dreary budget outlook, the idea of boosting education spending may not resonate with voters, said Barbara O'Connor, a professor of political communication at Sacramento State University.

"This is an issue that people won't have time to figure out because there's too many other things on the ballot that are more important to them," she said.

But Andrew Acosta, spokesman for the Yes on Proposition 92 campaign, said tough financial times may make the measure more attractive.

"People are concerned about the cost of higher education," he said. "For us to go out and say we're going to lower the cost of higher education, I think we have an opportunity to make our case to California voters."

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On the Net:

<http://www.prop92yes.com>

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