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CSU News -- November**Op/Ed Piece: California State Universities Save the State****By Kevin Starr***(Originally published in the Los Angeles Times on October 23, 2005)*

People used to come to California to find a better life. State government, by and large, was there to help. Today, it's of little solace. That's one reason November's special election is, in effect, a referendum on state government itself.

California has become expensive, competitive, demanding. The California dream was historically anchored in people's hope for a better life. Today, these people - mainly the middle class - work the hardest and the longest to make ends meet. And there's only one part of state government that is clearly there still to help ordinary people reach their dreams: the California State University system, an institution that has survived from what sometimes seems the long-gone golden age of California promise.

The CSU system is not just a government agency, however. It is, rather, a primary expression of the collective sovereignty of the people of California. It is the primary means and cutting edge in the struggle for California to sustain itself as a viable, competitive and humane society for ordinary citizens. One could write a history of contemporary California's creation almost exclusively by examining the rise and development of this institution.

Today, this great university grants nearly half of the state's baccalaureate degrees and a third of the master's degrees. It bestows 65% of the business baccalaureate degrees and more than half of the agricultural business and agricultural engineering baccalaureate degrees. And it trains 89% of the state's professionals in criminal justice, 87% of the teachers and related staff, 87% of the social workers and 82% of the public administrators.

The CSU system, in short, is keeping California afloat while offering poor and middle-class people a continuing opportunity to move into the sort of well-paying jobs a college degree affords. Few state agencies possess such a clear-cut and necessary role.

The University of California, according to the Master Plan for Higher Education adopted in 1960, has as its primary mission research and teaching. The California State University, by contrast, has as its primary mission the education and training of Californians through a fusion program of instruction, applied research and preparation for employment.

These distinct missions cannot over time remain so clear-cut. A number of departments in the CSU system - such as Cal State Fresno's viticulture and enology program - are at least as distinguished, in research terms, as comparable departments at UC, despite the heavier teaching load borne by the CSU faculty.

This distinction between what should be learned (research) and how that knowledge should be passed on (teaching) cannot in the long run be sustained. From this perspective, the University of California has to reconsider its policy of turning so much undergraduate instruction over to graduate students. And California State University cannot continue to be so limited in its research agenda, especially in areas such as education, its primary expertise - hence the recent announcement that the CSU system will now be authorized to grant a doctorate in that field.

Still, while the University of California will continue to enjoy the affection and loyalty of its graduates and the respect of the larger population, it cannot by definition become a populist institution. It is a research institution in the public service, with \$1 billion of its \$15-billion budget coming these days from private sources.

Although it also is increasingly ambitious in seeking private support, the CSU system, by contrast, is first and foremost a public enterprise: a direct creation of state government and, these days, perhaps the best connection state government enjoys with the people. Even our embattled legislators seem to understand this. Many of them, after all, are graduates of one or another CSU campus.

Kevin Starr, state librarian emeritus, is a university professor and professor of history at USC. His latest book, "California: A History," was published in October by Random House. This opinion piece by Starr was originally published in the L.A. Times in October.

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Cal Poly Public Affairs

California Polytechnic State University

San Luis Obispo, CA 93407

805.756.7266

polynews@calpoly.edu