Mercury News editorial: Legislature should raise community college fees

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Access to a high-quality college education has for decades been a pillar of California's economic success. That's why so many people are worried about rising fees in the CSU and UC systems, where they have more than doubled in recent years and, we've just learned, are set to go up again next year.

Although it sounds counterintuitive, access to our 112 community colleges -- the third leg of the state's system of higher education -- could actually be improved by increasing student fees, which are by far the lowest in the nation. Raising fees from $26 to $40 per unit, the level recommended by the Legislative Analyst's Office, would help the colleges restore services and classes, allowing them to educate more people and to do a better job serving the students they already have.

The national average for full-time community college fees is about $2,700, nearly four times what California students pay. Charging $40 per unit would bring an estimated $150 million in new revenue, but students would still be paying less than half the national average.

Poor students wouldn't be affected, even by such a big increase. The very generous Board of Governors waiver program already covers all fees for nearly a third of community college students; a portion of any increase would go toward that program.

Most importantly, access -- and quality -- for all would actually be improved by such an increase. The colleges' biggest problem is that they don't have the funding to provide the classes students need. Additional fees could be used to restore classes and other services, such as counseling and support for the disabled.

The Foothill-De Anza Community College District, for instance, said it cut 500 class sections last year and left 8,000 students on waiting lists. We're certain many students who pay fees -- by definition, those of at least middle income -- would have gladly shelled out an extra few hundred bucks to get the classes to finish school and move on to a career or four-year college.

Increased fees, however, can't be an excuse for the Legislature to make deeper cuts in general fund support. The system did get a $126 million increase in funding this year to accommodate thousands of new students, but that won't make up for previous service cuts. Higher student fees must go toward improving those services. As Scott Lay, president of the Community College League of California, put it: The state shouldn't double the price of a loaf of bread but provide only half the number of slices.

The importance of community colleges has only grown during this recession, as rising costs shut more young students out of four-year colleges and layoffs send more adults back to school to learn new skills. But when the economy recovers, community colleges

will be even more essential, helping remedy a huge expected shortfall in college-educated workers statewide.

As the UC regents and the CSU trustees finalize their plans for fee increases, the California Legislature should follow suit with a fee increase for community college students -- accompanied by a resolve not to decrease general fund support for this essential system.