Opinion: UC system caters to the rich and foreign

By Thomas D. Elias, San Jose Mercury News

The more that foreign and out-of-state students register at the University of California and higher tuition and fees are pushed, the more legitimate it becomes for taxpayers who built and still largely fund the 10-campus system to wonder who it will belong to in the future.

It's a question that got new force early this month when UCLA officials voted to take their graduate school of business private, making it depend solely on a variety of grants, plus student tuition and fees.

No one knows if the UC system will remain as it has been for more than 70 years – the single biggest incubator for upward mobility of young Americans – or if it will become a playground for the rich of California and other places.

But all indications at this moment are that UC campuses are gradually going to cater more and more to the wealthy.

It's all because of money: The state doesn't have as much as it needs to fund many basic services that have come to be expected, from parks to elementary and high school education to caring for the disabled elderly who have paid taxes all their lives and expected a bit of a safety net in their twilight years.

One result has been a steady reduction over the last decade in state support of UC, California State University and community college campuses. That has translated into major increases in tuition and fees that have hit all those campuses. UC tuition is about triple what it was 10 years ago, after increases of as much as 20 percent in some years. Taking away inflation, in

1980 the value of a typical California home would buy more than 200 years of a UC education. In 2011, it bought only approximately 30 years. So tuition, amazingly, has risen even faster than housing costs.

Another result of the funding cuts has been a decrease in the number of students transferring to UC schools from community colleges – always a good measure of future upward mobility – and a parallel increase in admission applications from other states and countries. Applications from out-of-staters don't usually arrive spontaneously; they tend to result from outreach efforts.

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