The looming crisis in higher education in Hawaii is connected to the crisis in public education here and to the failure of the state government to provide economic diversity and opportunity, and to manage the resources of this āina.

Most of the faculty at the University of Hawaii believe that higher education contributes to the health of the society, not just by training people into occupations but by exposing them to the magnificent contributions and ideas of other human beings in the world, to the incredible diversity of our non-human relations or fellow creatures that inhabit every nook and cranny on this globe, to a glimpse of the vast mysteries of space, and to create new ways of integrating the meaning of all of these things into our lives.

Education has always been a fundamental human endeavor, literally the only thing that enhances the stability and endurance of families, clans, tribes and societies. Education is not merely a responsibility that government takes on when it can afford to. For several centuries now, modern states have assumed the primary responsibility for educating children and youths, taking that role from the monasteries and churches and from families, clans and tribes in large part because the state conceived that it had an interest in determining the shape, focus and quality of education.

One of the first great financial obligations taken on by the Kingdom of Hawaii in the 1850s was the funding of public education and literacy, begun by missionaries in the 1820s. For many years the budget for education was, by far, the largest expenditure of the Kingdom. Government lands were generously committed to education and the result was that by the 1870s more than 75% of the whole population and likely, 100% of the Native Hawaiians, were literate.

The Kingdom knew what every public official in Hawaii today should also know: That an ignorant people are a poor people; less effective; less able to contribute to their own society, and more likely to despair and desperate acts.

No one disputes that the economy in Hawaii is in trouble. But we most certainly reject the notion that a good short-term strategy is to short-change education. Any teacher and professor who has been at this job for longer than ten years can tell you this: that we are usually the short-term solution to Hawaii’s economic uncertainties. And thus, bleeding education has actually been the long-term strategy, certainly for the 18 years that I have been teaching.

The State can say now that it cannot afford the price-tag of a good education. In which case, it should admit that it can afford nothing worthwhile, and invite a rigorous audit into what it does with the public funds, how it manages the incredible gifts of the Hawaiian Kingdom’s Crown and Government Lands (Ceded Lands), and whether the refusal to consider any kind of tax hike is based on a real knowledge of economics or just plain political ideology.

One thing we can be sure of. Cutting salaries and furloughing professors and teachers who are already among the worst paid in the United States assures us that recruiting good
teachers or good people into the profession here will be more difficult than ever. Here is a true story: William Huelani Coelho a representative in the Territorial Legislature introduced the resolution in 1905 that established a college, this university, for Hawai`i. He said that he had always wanted to go to college but couldn’t afford it. Opposition to higher education came from sugar and pineapple plantation owners and managers who feared that the children of their workers would be “educated away from labor.” In the 1960s and 70s those “children” now in firm control of the State legislature and the Governor’s office worked very hard to make the University of Hawaii an institution to which they could proudly and confidently send their children, while expecting that the university would, in turn contribute to the economic well-being of Hawaii. To them, these events today must seem particularly disheartening.

But perhaps that is the real message the state is sending. Good education awaits those who can afford to send their children somewhere else. Nothing could more appropriately sever the state government from the community it is supposed to serve than that message.

Professor Jonathan's Osorio Address to the Teach-In, 10/8/09