Protesters have a point
Higher ed costs out of control, putting many students deeply in debt

The occupation of the entrance to UC Santa Cruz on Thursday by about 150 students and faculty was relatively orderly and peaceful, considering how past protests have gone. Protesters and the administration worked together effectively to ensure this; the demonstration was timed with similar protests statewide calling for an overhaul of how public education is funded in California. While taxpayers might look at the protests and wonder why college students deserve a financial break when so many others in the state are hurting, it’s difficult not to empathize with the protesters’ message that something has to be done about spiraling tuition and costs.

We’ve been writing about this discouraging trend, which affects colleges and universities around the country. Most recently, we gave qualified support to President Barack Obama’s plan to tie future federal funding to colleges and universities with their success at curbing tuition.

Another part of the Obama proposal also is worthwhile: Working on a scorecard students and families could use in comparing graduation rates, along with informing applicants about how much debt they might acquire before graduating. As total federal loans have gone up 57 percent over the last decade, the average debt for students graduating from a public four-year college today is $22,000.

The administration seems to recognize that the availability of loans is a reason colleges and universities have no real market incentive to keep prices lower. The UCSC protesters also brought up the hiring and compensation practices at both UC and CSU campuses, although the main driver in higher costs is declining state support. UC officials suffered a 250 million cut in state funding last year. The state provided $100 million in funding to UCSC a couple of years ago; this year it was $116 million. Nationwide, tuition has risen at a faster rate than on any other major product or service, including gasoline and health care. If UC’s fees had only increased with the rate of inflation, students who paid $776 in 1988 would be paying $2,300 this year. Instead, tuition jumped 18 percent this year, to $22,192. If you add room and board and fees, the cost to attend a UC campus is about $31,000 a year. Despite the increased costs, applications to UCSC are up.

But the increases are why many students from middle-income families are forced to go deeply into debt, some for decades. And if they can’t come up with money, their parents are on the hook.

One way to cut costs is for students to finish in four years, although with class offerings reduced, this isn’t easy. At UCSC, about half the students currently graduate in four years.

Community colleges are another option — students can cut costs by attending a two-year school like Cabrillo College and then transferring. But community colleges have suffered substantial budget cuts themselves and are under pressure to put more resources into ensuring full-time students are able to move on to jobs or four-year schools as quickly as possible.

Restoring and shoring up funding for public higher ed in California is part of what Gov. Jerry Brown is selling to voters in the November election to approve tax hikes. Brown has warned that without stable sources of revenue, UC and CSU will be cut more and once again have to raise tuition. If the governor’s tax measures don’t pass in November, UCSC faces a $33 million funding cut.

Which means the protesters may be around for a while.