MU News Bureau

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How a 3.3 million-year-old toddler offers researchers a window into human evolution

By Peter Holley May 26 at 8:00 AM

Generated from News Bureau press release: 3.3 Million-Year-Old Fossil Reveals the Antiquity of the Human Spine

The fossilized piece of a cheek bone was spotted in a chunk of sandstone sticking out of the dirt in the scorching badlands of northeastern Ethiopia.

Zeresenay Alemseged knew almost immediately that he had stumbled upon something momentous.

The cheekbone led to a jaw, portions of a skull and eventually collar bones, shoulder blades, ribs and — perhaps most important — the most complete spinal column of any early human relative ever found.

Nearly 17 years later, the 3.3-million-year-old fossilized skeleton known as the “Dikika Baby” remains one of the most important discoveries in archaeological history, one that is filling in the timeline of human evolution.

“When you put all the bones together, you have over 60 percent of a skeleton of a child dating back to 3.3 million years ago, which is more complete than the famous australopithecine fossil known as 'Lucy,' ” Alemseged, a 47-year-old professor of organismal biology and anatomy at the University of Chicago, told The Washington Post. “We never had the chance to recover the face of Lucy, but the Dikika child is an almost complete skeleton, which gives you an impression of how children looked 3.3 million years ago.”
The fossil, also called “Selam” — “peace” in the Ethiopian Amharic language — has revealed numerous insights into our early human relatives. But Alemseged said one of the most startling findings comes from the toddler's spine, which had an adaptation for walking upright that had not been seen in such an old skeleton.

The result, he said, is a creature whose upper body was apelike, but whose pelvis, legs and feet had familiar, humanlike adaptations.

“If you had a time machine and saw a group of these early human relatives, what you would have said right away is, 'What is that chimpanzee doing walking on two legs?'” Alemseged said.

The findings, published this week in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, show for the first time the spinal column was humanlike in its numbering and segmentation. Though scientists know that even older species were bipedal, researchers said Selam's fossilized vertebrae is the only hard evidence of bipedal adaptations in an ancient hominid spine.

“Yes, there were other bipedal species before, but what is making this unique is the preservation of the spine, which simply is unprecedented,” Alemseged said. “Not only is it exquisitely preserved, but it also tells us that the human-type of segmentation emerged at least 3.3 million years ago. Could there have been other species with a similar structure, yes, but we don't know for sure.”

Human beings share many of the same spinal structures as other primates, but the human spine — which has more vertebrae in the lower back, for example — is adapted for efficient upright motion, such as walking and running on two feet.

Among the larger questions researchers like Alemseged are trying to answer include: When did our ancestors evolve the ability to be bipedal? When did we become more bipedal than arboreal, or tree-dwelling? And when did our ancestors abandon an arboreal lifestyle to become the runners and walkers that eventually populated Africa and then the world?

One of the significant barriers to answering those questions is that complete sets of vertebrae are rarely preserved in the fossil record.
“For many years we have known of fragmentary remains of early fossil species that suggest that the shift from rib-bearing, or thoracic, vertebrae to lumbar, or lower back, vertebrae was positioned higher in the spinal column than in living humans, but we have not been able to determine how many vertebrae our early ancestors had,” said Carol Ward, a curator's distinguished professor of pathology and anatomical sciences in the University of Missouri School of Medicine, and lead author on the study. “Selam has provided us the first glimpse into how our early ancestors’ spines were organized.”

Unpacking the intricacies of Selam's spinal structure would not have been possible without the assistance of cutting-edge technology, researchers said.

After 13 years of using dental tools to painstakingly remove portions of the fossil from sandstone — which risked destroying the fossil — Alemseged packed up Selam in his suitcase and took the fossil from Ethiopia to the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility in Grenoble, France, in 2010. Alemseged and the research team spent nearly two weeks there using high-resolution imaging technology to visualize the bones.

The fossil had undergone a medical CT scan in 2002 in Nairobi, Alemseged said, but that scanner was unable to distinguish objects with the same density, meaning that penetrating bones encased in sandstone was impossible. Once in France, that was no longer a problem, and the results, he said, “were mind-blowing.”

“We were able to separate, virtually, the different elements of the vertebrae and were able to do it, of course, without any damage to the fossil,” Alemseged said. “We are now able to see this very detailed anatomy of the vertebrae of this exceptionally preserved fossil.”

The scans revealed that the child possessed the thoracic-to-lumbar joint transition found in other fossil human relatives, but they also showed that Selam had a smaller number of vertebrae and ribs than most apes have.
For researchers, the skeleton is a window into the transition between rib-bearing vertebrae and lower back vertebrae, which allowed our early human ancestors to extend at the waist and begin moving upright, eventually becoming highly efficient walkers and runners.

Though he has been studying Selam for nearly two decades, Alemseged thinks the fossil has more secrets to share with the modern world.

“I don't think she will stop surprising us as the analysis continues,” he said. “Science and tech is evolving so much that I'm sure in a few years we'll be able to extract even more information that we're not able to extract today.”

GEORGE KENNEDY: With new chancellor in place, a chance to be optimistic

When I told my long-suffering wife I intended to write about Wednesday’s announcement of our university’s new chancellor, she replied with some asperity that she could predict what I would say.

“You’re always optimistic about the new people,” she said, noting that I’ve sometimes had cause to regret those first impressions.

Well, here we go again.
How could I not be optimistic? President Mun Choi, about whom I remain optimistic, was close to giddy as he introduced Alexander Cartwright. The standing-room-only welcoming crowd in the Alumni Center was buoyant. The sun was shining.

In the press conference that followed the opening ceremony, Rudi Keller of the Columbia Daily Tribune seriously asked the question I had posed half-jokingly to Mike Alden earlier as we walked into the building: Why would Dr. Cartwright, or anybody, want the job?

The chancellor-designate had his answer ready. MU, he said, is an attractive institution with a strong national reputation and a chance to be a leader. He had followed from a distance the turmoil of November 2015 and learned from the experience, as campus leaders here have done.

He sees this as a destination job rather than a stepping stone.

The steps in his own life and career have led from birthplace and boyhood in the Bahamas, which his family left for Iowa without his having obtained a high school diploma, to the community college he attended because he couldn’t qualify for the university, and then to the University of Iowa, where he earned at age 24 a bachelor’s degree and six years later a doctorate in electoral and computer engineering.

A couple of weeks short of his 52nd birthday, he comes to us from the State University of New York, where he has been provost and executive vice chancellor of a 64-campus system serving nearly 1.3 million students. He is a widely published scholar of optical sensors, a field I don’t even pretend to understand.

The two leaders stressed that they share a commitment to “innovative and affordable education,” in President Choi’s words. Both emphasized the importance of continuing a transparent process for making the hard decisions and strategic investments to come. Both pointed to Dr. Cartwright’s record at SUNY as an effective advocate of diversity and inclusion, in both faculty and students.
After the reception, I walked back down Francis Quadrangle. The iconic MU Columns stood fenced off, braced by scaffolding and shrouded in weather-proofing. A few workmen were getting started with an extensive repair and preservation project.

It occurred to me that in August, when the Cartwrights move into the Chancellor’s Residence on the quad, they’ll look out on what might be an appropriate metaphor for the assignment he is undertaking.

Like the Columns that symbolize it, the institution itself is showing the scars of battering — in the case of the columns battering by the weather and in the institution’s case by politics. The need of repair to both is apparent and urgent. In both cases, the process will require time and money.

Metaphor has its limits, though. Unlike the project to save the MU Columns, the challenge facing President Choi and Chancellor Cartwright isn’t just restoration.

When the scaffolding comes down, the Columns should look like they did 100 years ago. For the institution, that won’t do. One project is protecting the past. The other is preparing for the future.

The timetable calls for repair of the MU Columns to be finished by fall. Reimagining the university will take a bit longer. That’s probably why President Choi envisions a tenure for the new chancellor of at least five years.

Of course, that may be optimistic.
New Mizzou Chancellor's Salary Slightly Higher than Loftin's, Reflecting National Trends

By Nathan Lawrence

As the University of Missouri’s new chancellor steps into office later this year, he will do so with a larger base salary than his predecessor.

When former chancellor R. Bowen Loftin took office in 2013, he was offered a base salary of $450,000 a year before bonuses. Alexander Cartwright, who will be taking over the same position, signed a contract Wednesday to make about 8 percent more, $485,000 a year. In the same time period, the consumer price index, which measures cost of living, has only gone up about 3 percent.

Cartwright will also be eligible for transportation funds up to $15,000 a year and a retention bonus of $125,000. This bonus will only vest if he sticks around for five years.

Compensation packages like Cartwright’s are part of a growing trend across higher education. In November, a new chancellor at the University of Tennessee was hired for $585,000 a year, and the president at the University of Texas in Austin was hired in 2015 for $750,000.

UM System President Mun Choi says he believes the school reached a good agreement.

“This is a very competitive salary,” Choi said at the new chancellor’s announcement Wednesday, “and we are very pleased that Alex was focused more on his ability to contribute to the university rather than the compensation issue.”
Unlike former chancellor Loftin, if chancellor designate Cartwright ever leaves the chancellorship but remains on the faculty, he will take a substantial pay cut of nearly 50 percent.

Boone Hospital trustees address public concerns at Ashland forum

By Brittany Ruess

ASHLAND — The Boone Hospital Center Board of Trustees answered a variety of questions from hospital expenses to changes in federal health care law in its second round of public forums about hospital management options.

Trustees are reviewing five options for operating the hospital and have been holding forums with the public and hospital employees to receive feedback. They answered questions and addressed concerns Thursday evening inside the Southern Boone Elementary School Library.

The trustees’ current lease with St. Louis-based BJC HealthCare is set to expire in 2020, but parties must notify one another in 2018 if they wish to continue, change or end the lease. With that deadline in mind, the trustees opened up a request for proposals in spring 2016 to explore possibilities for new partners.

BJC is in the running, but has not submitted a formal proposal. Keith Hearle, a consultant for the trustees, said the company felt the timing was too soon based on when the current lease runs out.

Trustees are also considering leases with University of Missouri Health Care, Kansas City-based St. Luke’s Hospital and Duke LifePoint Health Care, a for-profit company based in Brentwood, Tenn. They also have the option to make Boone Hospital a standalone operation, meaning it would be managed by a newly-created not-for-profit.

Some residents, like in the public forum held last week in Columbia, expressed concerns about dissolving the lease with BJC.

Ann Anderson, of Columbia, said she has concerns that cost of health care at Boone Hospital could increase with another company. She also said she wants the hospital to maintain the high quality of care she’s received for the past 36 years.

“We’re used to Boone, we want Boone,” she said.
The trustees have a set of “guiding principles,” a list of seven factors that are playing into each of their negotiations. Each company is interested in maintaining current employees of Boone Hospital, but have different stipulations. Duke LifePoint would require a pre-employment screening and St. Luke’s would conduct an on-boarding process. Under the MU Health proposal, employees would be subject to any minimum qualification requirements.

Brian Neuner, chairman of the trustees, has said that keeping Boone Hospital employees and medical staff has always been a top priority for the trustees.

“What makes Boone Hospital great is the people,” Neuner said. “The same people are going to be there. Our team is going to be the same. That’s what you’re counting on.”

A man in the audience stated his worry about how jobs at Boone Hospital have moved to St. Louis under BJC’s management.

“We’ve also seen a lot of, what seems to be, a dictatorship on how we run things at Boone Hospital Center from the BJC side, specifically our IT department which has really slipped sideways over the past few years,” he said. He questioned how the different companies would allow local control over the hospital operations.

Neuner said the answer to that question lies within the different governance structures. BJC is governed by its own board, which Trustee Jan Beckett is a member of as a Boone Hospital representative.

The governing boards proposed for every other option would include community members.

Another guiding principle for the trustees is the hospital’s ability to partner with physicians under joint ventures, which is currently not allowed in the lease with BJC. All other options include some form of joint ventures.

A woman who didn’t wish to be identified said she has concerns about physician groups leaving Boone Hospital, such as its former surgical team which was replaced this year. Beckett said that concern is shared among the trustees.

“Physicians want more than we can give them, and so we would like to ‘adapt to changing circumstances’ and ‘enhance our Mid-Missouri strategy,’ ” she said, referencing the trustees’ list of guiding principles.

Many people expressed interest in the timing of the trustees’ decision. Beckett said the trustees would like to wrap up negotiations by the end of the year, but won’t rush the decision.

Bob Wagner, who was elected to a one-year, unexpired term in April, said he hopes the decision is made before the April 2018 election so that it won’t be the primary focus in candidate discussions, but he also said patience is necessary.

“This is a lifetime decision, so we have to get it right,” he said.
Jean Gurucharri, of Columbia, asked what will happen to Boone Hospital in between 2018 and 2020, the year the current lease expires, if the trustees don’t go with BJC.

Tom Schneider, an attorney for the trustees, said when BJC CEO Steve Lipstein was in Columbia last week, “he looked the trustees in the eye” and stated BJC’s commitment to Boone until 2020. He said the lease also includes protections for the hospital.

“There are some internal checks and balances in that document,” Schneider said.

The trustees are planning another public forum in Centralia, but the details are not yet set. After public and employee forums conclude, the trustees will continue negotiations to narrow down the options. Neuner said trustees will announce the finalists publicly, but gave no timeline as to when that might occur.

Retired University of Missouri administrator tapped to lead Lincoln U

By Ashley Jost St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 19 hrs ago

ST. LOUIS • Longtime University of Missouri administrator Michael Middleton was tapped Thursday to be the interim president at Lincoln University in Jefferson City.

This is the second time Middleton is coming out of retirement to lead a public college on an interim basis.

A few months after retiring from his position as deputy chancellor at Mizzou, Middleton agreed to serve as the interim president of the University of Missouri System following the resignation of Tim Wolfe in November 2015.

He formally retired — again — from the university in March when Mun Choi took over as permanent president.

His days of golf and time with the grandchildren didn't last long.
The Lincoln University board of curators voted to bring Middleton in starting next month while they lead a search for the next permanent president. Outgoing president Kevin Rome is headed to lead Fisk University, another Historically Black College and University.

“It is important to have at our helm someone who can help steady the waters in our current state,” board chairman Marvin Teer said in a statement. “We are going to take our time in finding the 20th President of Lincoln University, so we needed to be certain the university would be in good, capable hands during this transition period. Based on his entire career, we have found just what we need in Mike Middleton.”

Middleton heads to Lincoln during a time of stress as the school grapples with the impact of declining state funds.

Lincoln University named Mike Middleton as interim president Thursday, tapping the man who led the University of Missouri through one of its most difficult periods to guide it through a search for a replacement for Kevin Rome.

In a news release announcing the move, Lincoln Board of Curators president Marvin Teer said Middleton is well suited to lead the university during a difficult period ahead. On Monday, Lincoln announced it will cut the pay of every employee by 0.5 percent and eliminate 48 jobs, including 15.5 faculty positions, to close a $3.8 million deficit due to decreased state funding and other revenue losses.
“It is important to have at our helm someone who can help steady the waters in our current state,” Teer said.

In March, Rome announced he would leave Lincoln to become president of Fisk University in Nashville. The search for a replacement will be done in a deliberate way, Teer said, “so we needed to be certain the university would be in good, capable hands during this transition period.”

Middleton graduated MU in 1968 and earned his law degree from MU in 1971. He joined the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice and was deputy director of the Office of Civil Rights in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare before joining the law school faculty in 1985.

Middleton was deputy chancellor of MU for 17 years before retiring early in 2015. The UM Board of Curators picked him as interim president in November 2015 after President Tim Wolfe resigned under pressure from campus protests over racial issues.

Middleton’s tenure as interim UM president ended March 1 with the arrival of Mun Choi as the permanent president.

“Interim President Mike Middleton will bring the stability Lincoln University needs as we face the unique situation of searching for a President in the midst of grappling with budgetary and other concerns,” Teer said.
This appointment marks the second time in two years Middleton has been called upon to bring stability to an unfilled office after his retirement as MU deputy chancellor in 2015.

He succeeded UM System President Tim Wolfe in November 2015 after Wolfe resigned and served in that interim role until March 2017, when President Mun Choi took office.

"It is important to have at our helm someone who can steady the waters in our current state," Marvin Teer, president of Lincoln University's Board of Curators, said in a news release. "Based on his entire career, we have found just what we need in Mike Middleton."

Middleton also served as a professor and interim vice provost during his 30-year career at MU.

Rep. Courtney Allen Curtis, D-Ferguson, released a statement following the announcement criticizing Middleton's appointment. Curtis said in the statement that he believes Middleton "consistently failed to work on improving the diversity and providing more inclusion for minorities" while at the UM System. He asked Lincoln's Board of Curators to reconsider Middleton's appointment.

"Lincoln University is a historically black college and the students and faculty deserve to have a person who will fight for minorities in (the) role as president," Curtis said in the statement. "Over the last few years, Middleton has not had a strong working relationship with the legislative Black Caucus, from taking our questions and concerns to showing up at our hearings."

Curtis has criticized Middleton before while Middleton was the UM System interim president. During an April 2016 legislative hearing, Curtis questioned him on diversity efforts. Middleton said at the time that the UM System was working to improve diversity and inclusion, citing task forces, climate surveys and a statewide audit of diversity programs.

Middleton's appointment will begin next Thursday.
Lincoln University names Mike Middleton as its interim president

By Kyrah Davis

JEFFERSON CITY - Lincoln University announced Mike Middleton as its interim president Thursday as it prepares for current president Kevin Rome's departure.

Middleton will start on June 1, and Rome will resign effective June 30 to take over the next day as president of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee.

Middleton was appointed interim UM System president in November 2015 after Tim Wolfe resigned in the wake of protests over racial tensions on campus.

On Thursday, Middleton said the first thing he wants to do is talk to constituents and listen to their concerns.

Middleton said he believes Lincoln University and MU can have a "cooperative partnership" to improve both institutions.

He said LU needs to focus on financial recovery.

"We've got to really think about new ways to generate revenue," Middleton said.

This comes days after the university announced 48 positions would be cut and all employees would see a 0.5 percent pay cut in the new fiscal year.

The curators said Middleton will bring stability the university needs to face its unique situations. The curators said they will take their time in finding a permanent president.
Former Interim President of MU announced as Interim President of LU


By Marie Bowman

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. - The former Interim President of MU has just been announced as the next Interim President for Lincoln University on Thursday.

Michael Middleton was the former interim president of the MU System until President Mun Choi took over earlier this year.

"I'm excited about possibilities of working with Lincoln. I'm very pleased to be working with my former students... More collaboration, more innovation. We have to do smart things very quickly," said Middleton. "All I can do is listen and learn and bring stability to the university."

Middleton is expected to start on June 1, 2017.

The official release from Lincoln University is below.

MICHAEL MIDDLETON NAMED INTERIM PRESIDENT

The Lincoln University Board of Curators have announced Michael Middleton as Interim President of Lincoln University. Middleton, who most recently served as Interim President of the University of Missouri System, will hold the position until a replacement for outgoing President Dr. Kevin D. Rome is named. Rome’s last official day with the university is June 15 and Middleton will spend time on campus prior to his departure.
Middleton was appointed by the University of Missouri Board of Curators as Interim President of the four-campus system in November 2015, following a semester of turmoil that resulted in the resignation of several key system officials. Lincoln Curators say his proven leadership during uncertain times will serve the university well.

“It is important to have at our helm someone who can help steady the waters in our current state,” says President of the Board of Curators Marvin Teer. “We are going to take our time in finding the 20th President of Lincoln University, so we needed to be certain the university would be in good, capable hands during this transition period. Based on his entire career, we have found just what we need in Mike Middleton.”

His law career led him to the nation’s capital, as a trial attorney with the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, and then later as the Assistant Deputy Director of the Office of Civil Rights within what was then the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. He would also serve as the Director of the Office of Systematic Programs for the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (EEOC), as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights in the Department of Education, and as Associate General Counsel of the EEOC’s trial division, before returning to Missouri as the Director of the St. Louis District Office of the EEOC.

Middleton, who earned a bachelor’s degree in political science from the University of Missouri in 1968 and is a 1971 graduate of the University of Missouri School of Law, made history in 1985 when he returned to his alma mater as the first full-time African American professor within the School of Law. Following his time in the classroom, Middleton served as Interim Vice Provost for Minority Affairs and Faculty Development, and finally as Deputy Chancellor, from which he retired in August 2015. He is known as a leader with a strong focus on policy and regulatory compliance, as well as operational performance and dispute resolution.

“Interim President Mike Middleton will bring the stability Lincoln University needs as we face the unique situation of searching for a President in the midst of grappling with budgetary and other concerns. Though he comes to us only temporarily, the Board is certain his time in this role will have a positive long-term effect on our historic institution,” says Teer.
Former UM System interim president to fill president vacancy at Lincoln University

Watch story: http://mms.tveys.com/PlaybackPortal.aspx?SavedEditID=a4c636ab-1e2e-4ae2-83ce-8702c0432e94

By Greg Dailey

JEFFERSON CITY — Lincoln University has tabbed a familiar name in mid-Missouri to serve as its interim president.

Mike Middleton, the former interim president for the University of Missouri System, was appointed interim president at Lincoln University in an announcement Thursday morning.

"Higher education funding pinch was probably harsher at Lincoln University than at MU," he said. "We've got to do some smarts things very quickly."

Lincoln University released the following statements in a release:

"It is important to have at our helm someone who can help steady the waters in our current state," says President of the Board of Curators Marvin Teer. "We are going to take our time in finding the 20th President of Lincoln University, so we needed to be certain the university would be in good, capable hands during this transition period. Based on his entire career, we have found just what we need in Mike Middleton."

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government policy is hurting, not fostering, many people’s chance to earn the most reliable ticket to a good job and a better life.

The decline of economic diversity at top public colleges is the clearest pattern in The Times’s third annual ranking of leading colleges — the roughly 170 nationwide with a five-year graduation rate of at least 75 percent. (Yes, you can be disappointed that so few colleges clear that bar.)

Many are doing less than they once did. At the public colleges in the index, the average share of last year’s freshman class receiving Pell grants — which means they typically come from the bottom half of the income distribution — fell to 21.8 percent, from 24.3 percent in 2011-12. Campuses with declining economic diversity include the Universities of Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, Pittsburgh and Wisconsin, as well as Binghamton, Ohio State and Rutgers.

By comparison, the Pell share has recently held roughly constant at top private colleges, around 16 percent.

Some of the biggest declines have been in the University of California system, which has long been the most economically diverse place in elite higher education. On the San Diego campus five years ago, 46 percent of freshmen received Pell grants. Last year, the share had dropped to 26 percent. When I first saw that number in The Times database, I figured it was a typo.

It wasn’t. The United States is investing less in college education, at the same time that the globalized, digital economy has made that education more important than ever. Gaps between college graduates and everyone else are growing in one realm of society after another, including unemployment, wealth and health.

Given these trends, the declines in state funding are stunning. It’s as if our society were deliberately trying to restrict opportunities and worsen income inequality.

Since 2008, states’ per-student spending on higher education has fallen 18 percent nationwide, according to inflation-adjusted numbers from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. The cuts have occurred in both blue and red states, with somewhat larger ones in Republican-run states. States made deep cuts after the financial crisis and have since failed to restore funding, choosing instead to cut taxes or spend money on health care, prisons or other areas.

“States are making it much more difficult for their residents to get high-quality higher education,” Sandy Baum of the Urban Institute said. “They are causing their institutions to charge more, to take more out of state students, to cut quality. It’s very shortsighted.” That’s exactly the right word, because spending on education often more than pays for itself in the long run.

The budget cuts affect every realm of higher education, with some of the biggest damage happening at community colleges and less selective four-year institutions. These campuses enroll
the great majority of lower-income college students. Yet flagship public campuses — like those in Ann Arbor, Mich., Boulder, Colo., and Gainesville, Fla. — are important to upward mobility too, given the success of their graduates.

In the last few years, many flagships have begun to recruit more upper-income students from outside their state, including from overseas. Those students don’t qualify for in-state tuition or for much financial aid — and thus help bolster the colleges’ budgets.

Often, college officials describe the strategy in different terms. They say that they are trying to lift their campus’s national profile, not to mention its U.S. News ranking. To do so, they must recruit a larger pool of students with high test scores than exists in their own state.

But the net result, to put it bluntly, is bad for the country. Top state universities are displacing impressive low-income students, who have often overcome troubled neighborhoods and high schools. Many of those students then enroll instead in colleges with fewer resources and higher dropout rates. In the process, the higher-education system becomes a bit less meritocratic.

The story in California is a bit more nuanced, but still disappointing, particularly given the state university’s history. Since its founding, during a burst of national investment during and just after Abraham Lincoln’s presidency, no other university in the world has combined academic excellence and broad access so well.

John Aubrey Douglass, an education scholar, describes that combination as “the California idea.” The top five colleges in this year’s College Access Index ranking are still University of California campuses: Irvine, Santa Barbara, Davis, San Diego and Los Angeles. Berkeley ranks ninth, while the private colleges in the top 10 are Amherst, Pomona and Harvard.

Yet even as California remains a leader, it is also inching away from its legacy.

With state support down, university leaders have decided that their least bad option is to enroll more high-income students. In only four years, undergraduate enrollment in the University of California system has risen 15 percent, or by 27,000 students. The expansion has allowed the colleges to continue enrolling similar numbers of lower-income students, rather than displacing those students, but it has created severe crowding.

“It’s pretty bad,” Gabriel Schneider, an editor of The Triton student newspaper on the San Diego campus, told me. Single dormitory rooms have been turned into doubles and even triples. Libraries and other common spaces are packed. The university tried to convert an art gallery into a classroom, only to back down after an uproar.

On the Davis campus, near Sacramento, the crowding has particularly harmed less affluent students, because apartment rents have jumped. “The housing shortage in Davis is just horrible,” said Scott Dresser, a fourth-year student. Some students are now commuting from Woodland, 10 miles away, said Eli Flesch, another fourth-year student.

What would be a better solution?
For one thing, universities should be scouring their budgets, looking for spending that’s less important to their mission than economic diversity and meritocracy are. There is no shortage of suspects: struggling academic programs, spiffy recreation centers, expensive sports teams, bureaucratic bloat.

But such cuts are not the only answer, even if some governors and state legislators claim otherwise. This country should also be investing more of its resources in education.

A century ago, it did precisely that, making high school universal and making possible the so-called American century. Today’s economy demands many more college graduates than the country currently has. Producing them won’t be free. But it will be worth it.

The alternative — which is the path we’re now on — is just about the worst economic-development strategy imaginable.