Here are two pieces of wisdom I heard last week.

(1) You can't cut off a tree branch and say, "I'll put it back later."

(2) If you have one cup of water left and a pump that needs priming, it's smarter to prime the pump than to drink the water.

Both the "tree" and the "pump" represent our state university system.

If it's a tree, it took many years to get where it is. Hack it off, and it will take many years more to grow back.

If it's a pump, we can use it to nourish and save our state — or we can drink that last cup of water, claiming that today's thirst justifies it, and squander the future.

How big is the possible cut in the budget of Florida's university system this year, when you compare what our state Senate and our state House want to do?

Big enough that we could practically eliminate the entire state appropriation to the University of Florida, and that still wouldn't make up the difference.

If you'd rather, we could just about wipe the University of South Florida off the map. Or Florida State. Or a few of the smaller ones, package deal.

It is no less a catastrophe if, instead, we hide the elimination of a Gator-sized university inside the separate budgets of the schools.

Here's another yardstick. Under the worst of the proposed cuts, Florida's universities would be taking a 37 percent hit in their general revenue over a two-year period.

It is a small irony that, of the competing Senate and House versions of the budget, the Senate's is known as the "good" bill. Give the Senate credit for that much.

If you throw in gambling, higher tuition and federal stimulus dollars, the Senate budget actually claims to be a slight increase over the current year.

Still, that masks quite a bit. It masks the fact that the Senate's starting idea was to cut $250 million out of university general revenue, the bread and butter of operations.

It masks the fact that the stimulus money will not last forever, and taking it now is like taking out a huge "balloon mortgage" that will blow up in our faces in a couple of years.

Neither do much-touted tuition increases save the day — not even close.

And yet the House's budget, compared to the Senate's, is an unabashed disaster. It is upward of $400 million
There is no way the universities can take that big a hit without firing professors, shutting down programs and shutting out students.

The University of South Florida, for instance, stands to lose up to $78 million in general revenue (from a starting point of $233 million) over a two-year period.

Each program, each department, each area of research, takes years to build.

"It compounds over time," says John Delaney, acting chancellor of the state system. "You can't just say, "Let's go hire five new engineers.'"

Fewer degrees, fewer departments, fewer professors and fewer students also translates into fewer federal dollars and fewer research grants.

It's a negative multiplier effect, a downward spiral.

Everybody in Florida ought to know that the best future of our state lies with the university system, and our worst future, without it.

For now, the universities have little choice except to hope the Legislature moves in the direction of the "good" Senate bill. But that is only for now. For tomorrow, we can't keep on like this. We just can't.