Back to $School$: College Is the Past, Prison Is the Future

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It was the greatest education system the world had ever seen. They built it into the eucalyptus-dotted Berkeley hills and under the bright lights of Los Angeles, down in the valley in Fresno and in the shadow of the San Bernardino Mountains. Hundreds of college campuses, large and small, two-year and four-year, stretching from California’s emerald forests in the north to the heat-scorched Inland Empire in the south. Each had its own DNA, but common to all was this: they promised a “public” education, accessible and affordable, to those with means and those without, a door with a welcome mat into the ivory tower, an invitation to a better life.

Then California bled that system dry. Over three decades, voters starved their state -- and so their colleges and universities -- of cash. Politicians siphoned away what money remained and spent it more on imprisoning people, not educating them. College administrators grappled with shriveling state support by jacking up tuitions, tacking on new fees, and so asking more each year from increasingly pinched students and families. Today, many of those students stagger under a heap of debt as they linger on waiting lists to get into the over-subscribed classes they need to graduate.

California’s public higher education system is, in other words, dying a slow death. The promise of a cheap, quality education is slipping away for the working and middle classes, for immigrants, for the very people whom the University of California’s creators held in mind when they began their grand experiment 144 years ago. And don’t think the slow rot of public education is unique to California: that state’s woes are the nation’s.

Dream Deferred

Rachel Baitz

lives this grim reality. In 2010, after a decade working as a preschool teacher and a teacher’s assistant, the 28-year-old Baitz went back to school, choosing De Anza, a two-year community college near San Jose. She remembers the sticker shock when she first arrived on campus -- the cost per class had spiked startlingly since she graduated from high school in 2000. She would live lean, pick up side jobs, sacrifice what she could to get a degree. “I was willing to be poor and not know if I’m gonna make it,” she told me on a recent morning, her roommate’s cat meowing in the background. “I wanted that degree so I could have a better future.”

She squeezed 20 units of classes into a quarter (not the 12 to 15 of the average student). She worried each week about having enough money for rent, books, food. Still, she thrived. She founded De Anza’s Women Empowered Club, won the school’s President’s Award for overcoming adversity, and planned to transfer to nearby Santa Clara University to double major in psychology and women’s studies -- until, that is, a state-funded “Cal Grant” fell through.

She met all the qualifications, she told me, but Cal Grant officials informed her that she was too old. The likely culprit, whatever they claimed: the endless state budget cuts that had forced officials to scale back the Cal Grant program. The experience, she said, shook her fundamental belief in the promise California made to its students: “The impression you have is, ‘I do a great job at De Anza and I’ll get to the next level.’ The reality is there might not be a place for you.”

This is something new in what was once known as “the golden state.” For nearly as long as colleges and universities operated in California, there was a place for every student with the grades to get in. Classes were cheap, professors accessible, and enrollments grew at a rapid clip. When my own father started at Mt. San Antonio College in southern California in August 1976, anyone 18 or older could enroll, and a semester’s worth of classes cost at most $24. Then, like so many Californians, he transferred to a four-year college, the University of California-Davis, and paid a similarly paltry $220 a quarter. Dave’s 2012 per-quarter tuition price: $4,620.

Today, public education in California is ever less public. It is cheaper for a middle-class student to attend Harvard (about $17,000 for tuition, room, and board with the typical financial-aid program included) than Cal State East Bay, a mid-tier school that’ll run that same middle-class student $24,000 a year. That speaks to Harvard’s largesse when it comes to financial aid, but also the relentless rise of tuition costs in California. For the first time in generations, California’s community colleges and state universities are turning away qualified new students and shrinking their enrollments as state funding continues its long, slow decline. Many students who do gain admission struggle to enroll in the classes they need -- which, by the way, cost more than they ever have. "We're in a new era," says John Aubrey Douglass, an expert on the history of higher education in California. He’s not exaggerating. Not a bit.

"In the Valley with the People"

California would not exist as we know it today without higher education. At its peak, the state’s constellation of community colleges and Cal State and University of California campuses had no rival. It was the crown jewel of American education.
Abraham Lincoln launched the college-building craze when, in 1862, as the bullets flew and the bodies fell on the battlefields of the Civil War, he signed the Morrill Act, giving every state a huge tract of federal land with which to build a public university. In 1869, California joined the craze by opening the University of California. One newspaper editorial hailed it as "the perfect structure, a magazine of new thoughts and new motives, ready for the new and bright day of the future." Another supporter declared that it would be a "mighty anchor in the stream of time."

Yet not until California's trust-busting Progressive politicians claimed power in the early 1900s did the populist promise of the state's higher education system begin to take shape. The Progressives saw higher education as a path to the middle class and with an educated middle class they were convinced they could loosen the stranglehold corporate powers like the Southern Pacific Railroad had on the state. "The university was their Progressive dream come true," historian Kevin Starr has written.

State support for the University of California soared from a few hundred thousand dollars in 1900 to more than $3 million by 1920. As future UC president Clark Kerr would write, "The campus is no longer on the hill with the aristocracy but in the valley with the people."

Down in that valley, more and more people wanted an education. New campuses sprouted statewide before World War II, and then in its wake were flooded with returning GIs and former war workers. Governor Earl Warren used those colleges and universities as "shock absorbers" when the state's wartime economy-on-steroids slowed. He put $16 million on a novel concept: California would educate its way out of any post-war slump.

The education system exploded in the 1940s and 1950s. Students poured into classrooms. But not until Kerr became president did he and other education leaders attempt to create a systemic blueprint for growth with what was called the "California Master Plan for Higher Education." Under this plan, the brightest students were to attend a flagship UC school, the next-smarterest group would go to a Cal State school, and the remainder would start at a two-year community college with an eye toward transferring to a four-year college.

The Master Plan brought order to a rapidly growing system. It was hailed around the world as a stroke of genius when it came to educating young people. In 1960, Time magazine even put Kerr on its cover, bestowing on him the title of "master planner." (Kerr was a complicated figure. He later clashed with UC-Berkeley's famed Free Speech Movement, yet FBI director J. Edgar Hoover believed he was too close to campus activists and secretly pushed for his ouster. The college's board of regents unceremoniously fired him in 1967.)

This was the heyday of California higher education. Enrollment grew by 300% between 1930 and 1960, and the state's share of college funding kept pace. But that all started to change on June 6, 1978, when California voters approved Proposition 13, a ballot measure that limited property tax assessments. More importantly, it handcuffed state lawmakers by requiring a two-thirds supermajority any time they wanted to increase taxes, and made a two-thirds vote among citizens necessary to raise local taxes. Prop. 13 kicked off California's "tax revolt" of the 1970s and 1980s, a slew of ballot measures that choked off revenue for state and local governments and left lawmakers scrambling to fill the gap. It was the beginning of the demise of public higher education in California.

"We're Just Getting Chainsawed"

Journalist Peter Schrag describes what followed as the "Missessionification" of California. Hit with the fever of an anti-tax, small-government movement, Californians began the long, slow burn-down of the state's higher education system. As Jeff Bleich, a former Cal State trustee and former counsel to President Obama, put it in 2009, California higher education "is being starved to death by a public that thinks any government service -- even public education -- is not worth paying for. And by political leaders who do not lead but instead give in to our worst, shortsighted instincts."

The numbers tell the story. In 2011, public colleges and universities received 13% less in state money than they had in 1980 (when adjusted for inflation). In 1980, 15% of the state budget had gone to higher education; by 2011, that number had dropped to 9%. Between the 2010-11 and 2011-12 state budgets, lawmakers sliced away another $1.5 billion in funding, the largest such reduction in any high-population state in the country.

Dianne Klein, a spokeswoman for the office of University of California president Mark Yudof, couldn't contain her dismay when reacting to recent cuts. "Here we have the world's best public university system, and we're just getting chainsawed," she told the Daily Californian. "Public education is dying, and perhaps we are reaching a tipping point."

According to a 2010 report by the Public Policy Institute of California, young adults in California are less likely to graduate from college than their parents. Among the 20 most populous states, California ranked 18th in 2010 in its rate of students going straight from high school to college; factor in all states and California ranked 40th. According to the institute, this crumbling bridge between high school and college means California could face a shortfall of a million skilled workers by 2025.

And what awaits the students who do make it into the ivory tower? Let me paint you a grim picture. Colleges are piling the gap in state funding by leaning ever harder on students and their families to pay more in tuition and fees. Thirty years ago, the state accounted for nearly 70% of public higher education funding; today, it's 25%. In the last five years alone, student fees have doubled for University of California and Cal State students. For community college students, they've leapt by 80%.

Students increasingly hunt for grants and scholarships to cover some of their growing share of the tab, but far more often their only option is to take out loans. According to Project on Student Debt, in 2010 nearly half of all graduates of public and private four-year schools in California were saddled with an average debt load of $16,000. Nationally, a record one-in-five college graduates has student loan debt, and in 2010, the national average for debt owed was $26,882, according to a recent report from the Pew Research Center.

In California, community colleges have always been the most democratic of California's higher education options. They educate the majority of students, offer the most classes, and provide students with job training or a launching pad to a four-year college. They have, however, taken a Mike Tyson-esque beating in California's budget crises, losing $909 million -- or 12% of their state funding -- since 2008.
That’s meant reduced class offerings, fewer sections of the classes that remain, and the laying off of faculty and staff. At the start of the 2012-13 school year, 65% of California’s 112 community colleges had waiting lists of students trying to get into overcrowded classes. In all, 420,000 community college students were stuck in such a situation. Eighty-two percent of these colleges said they weren’t offering any winter semester classes at all. Enrollment is down at community colleges by 17%.

“We’re at the breaking point,” Jack Scott, the recently retired community college chancellor, told the Los Angeles Times in September.

Mariamet Tirado, a student at Los Angeles Trade Tech, told the Times that class shortages mean: it could take her three to four years to get her two-year associate’s degree. Tirado’s situation is increasingly common now. “It’s hard to explain to my mom that I’m trying to go to school but the classes are not there.” she said.

The budget cuts have also hit faculty and staff hard. Seventy percent of community colleges said in a recent survey that they’d cut hours for support staffs. On Cal State campuses, the faculty-student ratio has jumped from 21 students per faculty member in 1960 to 32-to-1 in 2010 -- and the same trend can be seen among the system’s elite schools, with the faculty-student ratio there inching up from 16-to-1 to 21-to-1 over the same period. As faculty members deal with larger class size, more papers to read, more tests to grade, their pay has failed to keep pace. Salaries for Cal State professors haven’t budged from the $75,000 to $93,000 range for the last 30 years. Adjust for inflation and CSU professors earned less in 2010 than they did in 1980.

So where did all that money go? Here’s a hint: Look for the men who wear orange jump suits, sleep stacked atop each other in triple-decker bunk beds, and each year gobble up an ever greater share of California’s ever scarcer finances.

The State’s higher education and prison systems are a study in opposites. The prison system saw its state funding in dollars leap 436% between 1980 and 2011. Back then, spending on prisons was a mere 3% of California’s budget; it’s now 10%. According to the nonpartisan transparency group California Common Sense, the prison population expanded at eight times the growth rate of California’s population. In May 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered the state to immediately shrink its prison population because its treatment of prisoners constituted cruel and unusual punishment. At the time, its 33 prisons held 143,321 inmates (official capacity: 80,000).

If money talks, then California’s message is plain enough: prisoners matter more than students. Put another way: college is the past, jail is the future.

Anger and disillusionment over California’s abandonment of its students, teachers, and staff boiled over in 2011. Protests sprang up at campuses across the state. Students shut down a meeting of the University of California’s Board of Regents, walked out of classes at San Francisco State, and clashed with truncheon-swinging police in Lompoc Beach and Berkeley.

But the most indelible of these protests unfolded on the campus of UC-Davis, an hour’s drive northeast of San Francisco. Student protesters there disobeysed campus rules by staging a peaceful sit-in on a footpath in the campus quad. For their efforts Lt. John Pike, a barrel-chested, helmeted, mustachioed campus cop, doused them with pepper spray. He did so in a manner so nonchalant that it triggered immediate shock and outrage: photos and videos of the incident shot across the globe in meme form. There was Lt. Pike pepper-spraying God in Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam," scolding the Declaration of Independence in John Trumpell's 1871 painting, feeding the raging flames that swallowed up the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc after he had set himself ablaze in Saigon in 1963.

A rallying cry for the dozen or so students who occupied that path was the price of an education. In just eight years, tuition at UC-Davis had more than doubled.

Back to School -- or Not?

Rachel Baltazar did not show up for fall classes at Santa Clara University. Without the state grant she’d hoped for, she returned to De Anza for a third year. She’s starting a paid internship in which she’ll school students in how to better navigate the world of college financial aid. "I want to try to help people understand what their options are," she told me. "I don’t want somebody else to be in my shoes. It was so hard.

Recently, Baltazar and a friend traveled down the coast to Santa Cruz. She stopped in a tourist shop, and a postcard on a rack caught her eye. It listed a smattering of facts from 1981, the year she was born. Her gaze settled on one particular figure: Harvard University tuition was then $6,000. The nation’s oldest and most prestigious university had cost just six grand. That’s $15,200 in today’s dollars. She couldn’t believe it. At De Anza, Baltazar said she spent $18,000 a year in tuition and living costs.

Baltazar told me that she’s still set on getting her bachelor’s degree. She’ll try again for Santa Clara, and also apply to state schools. She’s not picky; she can’t afford to be. "I will apply to anybody who will take me and help me pay for it," she said.

Like a lot of young people in California, Baltazar clings to the dream of public higher education, but in her life, as in those of so many others across the state, it’s curdling into something more like a nightmare. “I went to school in California because I knew there were more financial aid options, I knew about the Cal Grant, and I thought, ‘I should be able to get these things,’” she told me. "In California, the education system is great -- if you can afford it. If you can’t afford it, it's kind of a moot point.”

California once led the way into a system of unparalleled public higher education. It now seems determined to lead the way out of it!

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