

Are public colleges finished?

COVID-19 could topple public universities, which have been targeted by neoliberals since the 1970s.

BY BENJAMIN BALTHASER

“How did you go bankrupt?” a character in *The Sun Also Rises* asks over drinks. “Two ways,” the friend replies, “gradually, then suddenly.” As we watch public university systems furlough staff and threaten to shut their doors, we might ask the same question. In just the last few weeks, states from Missouri to Nevada to New Jersey have announced double-digit cuts to their higher education budgets, Vermont threatened to close all but its flagship campus, and the University of Ohio has announced layoffs in the hundreds and the shuttering of whole programs, from African American studies to Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies.

For state colleges and universities, trouble has been a long time coming. They have been in the cross hairs of neoliberalism since the late 1970s. Once-robust institutions offering free education to millions of students and stable, often unionized employment to hundreds of thousands of faculty and staff across the country, state colleges have seen their budgets go down sometimes by as much as 90% since the Reagan years. In the last decade alone, states slashed \$9 billion from their higher education budgets.

Cost is perhaps the most visible sign of the years of austerity. When my mom attended UCLA as a working-class, first-generation student in the mid-1960s, she paid nothing. Tuition and fees at UCLA now run over \$10,000 a year. Student debt nationwide last year topped one trillion dollars, with the average student loan burden around \$30,000.

The other crisis is far less visible. Until the mid-1980s, three-quarters of all faculty were tenured or tenure-track. Today, two-thirds of university instruction is done by lecturers and adjuncts. These are faculty with no free-speech protections who are often on short-term contracts. Most adjuncts are paid between \$2,000 and \$5,000 per course, which works out to just above minimum wage. One adjunct in my own department said she



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UCLA, one of the flagship public universities in the country, has been a target of the Right for decades.

calculated her hourly pay at under \$3.

In short, low-wage temporary faculty teach highly indebted students, staffed often by outsourced food and service workers.

Yet the question remains: Why is the university such a site of neoliberal transformation? One needs to remember that the political rise of the New Right began not only as an assault on unions and affirmative action, but as an attack on the crown jewel of the public university system—the University of California. Ronald Reagan ran for governor of California against the “hippies” and Black Power protesters of Berkeley and UC San Diego. In a press conference two weeks after he introduced tuition for UC schools, he stated that making students pay for higher education would, “get rid of undesirables. Those there to agitate and not to study might think twice before they pay tuition—they might think twice how much they want to pay to carry a picket sign.” In an influential document written at the same time, Reagan adviser and future Supreme Court justice Lewis Powell characterized higher education not as a means to democratize society or for class advancement for lower- and middle-class students, but rather as an epic struggle between social norms and radical student and faculty culture.

Although the Left may discount this as rhetorical posturing, the public university is, or at least was, an institution unlike

any other. Often one of the last wall-to-wall union employers, it attracted the likes of Angela Davis, Herbert Marcuse, and Naomi Klein. While public universities are engines of economic growth, they are purposely designed not to adhere to market efficiencies. Writing papers, reading literature, learning differential equations, speaking foreign languages, engaging in long discussions about history and philosophy—these are not activities that generate revenue. Nor are they meant to.

Their purpose is to turn students into thinking people, and more important, into critical citizens. Higher education is by definition a social good, not something to be engaged in solely for private gain. In other words, it is designed as the opposite of an entrepreneurial society.

That vision of the university remains, like democracy itself, as a half-finished promise, never having been available for everyone. Yet it is clear that the assault on the public university was no accident. Democratic and Republican legislatures alike converged to imagine a public university entirely privatized, funded solely through tuition (albeit often with subsidies for low-income students), private foundations, and research grants, in ways that reflected governments’ general turn away from welfare (as in for the common good) to a predatory state. As perhaps the most dramatic illustration of this, money taken from the UC and California State University system was diverted directly

into the boom of prison building in the 1980s and 1990s.

COVID-19 may be the final blow. The model in which the “student is the ATM,” as one UC administrator put it, is no longer viable. Students can neither afford an expensive degree nor will they sign up for classes that will, out of necessity, be online. I expect that we will see many more public colleges threatened with closure, or perhaps worse, running as ghost ships, with skeleton crews of non-tenured faculty and highly leveraged students. Purdue University’s decision to re-open in the fall, and put students, community members, and staff at risk, only displays the fatal logic of neoliberal institutions that must run like for-profit businesses.

Yet it doesn’t have to be this way. Bernie Sanders’s proposal for free public college and reinstatement of tenure is exactly the kind of vision we need. What is remarkable about Sanders’s proposal is precisely that it is framed as a public good, available to all. Like water, and, we hope, housing and food, we should have a right to it because we are alive.

It is no accident that it is at public universities that we see movements by students and faculty demanding that universities be more inclusive, respect students of color, and offer staff a living wage. The university can be an incubator and reservoir of the values we need now that capitalism is in ruins around us, of life not lived for profit. Or it can be another piece of the wreckage of neoliberalism, abandoned by the rich as they run for their bunkers.

As I write in early May, faculty unions, AAUP (American Association of University Professors) chapters, and student organizations have been issuing petitions, organizing online union meetings, and in some cases even reversing some of these cuts, as in the University of Vermont system’s recent announcement it will not close three campuses after all. They need our support if we are to emerge from this pandemic with anything resembling a notion of our collective good. ■

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