

Privatization Is *The Issue*

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I have been asked by colleagues to comment on the impending privatization of the University of California. Among the suggestions are that UC campuses should take more out-of-state students in order to get their higher tuitions, or that tuition should be raised to match those of private universities and that no state funds be used at all to support the UC system. I have specifically been asked to comment on the moral issues involved.

The California Master Plan speaks of “state-supported higher education.” There is a good reason.

Government has two moral missions: protection and empowerment for all its citizens. Protection goes beyond police and law enforcement to protections for consumers, workers, the environment, investors, retirees, and victims of disease, injury, and natural disasters. Empowerment includes public roads and buildings; and adequate systems for communication, energy, water; functioning banking and insurance systems, and of course, education. No one makes a living in this state without protection and empowerment by the government. And those who get more out of protection and empowerment by the state have a moral obligation to pay more to sustain them.

It appears that the top 1% of individual taxpayers pay about 45% of the state’s income taxes, and that the same top 1% own about 50% of the assets in the state. They are so rich that after paying all that they remain the top 1%. Have these folks amassed their wealth by working that many more hours than the average worker? No. They have amassed their wealth because the companies they own or invest in are empowered by having state-subsidized water, state-built freeways and public buildings, a state-protected environment, and state-based systems of protection of many kinds and especially state-educated employees and state supported university research.

The protection and empowerment that have come from our universities is staggering. There are obvious cases: Medical research and university hospitals and clinics; the computer industry and its spin-offs in media, film and the arts; environmental science that has led to the maintenance and improvement of our environment; the wine industry coming out of UC Davis; tens of thousands of people trained in business, law, and economics; our public health system; and on and on.

The university is lot more than an economic engine: it is a quality of life engine. And when it is truly public, it is a moral engine.

And it is especially a moral engine because it *educates* millions of Californians. Education is about more than making money. It is about coming to know the world, about learning to think critically, and about developing the capacity to create new knowledge, new social institutions, and new kinds of businesses. It is about each of millions of people becoming more of what they can be. That is the real promise of California. It is our system of higher education that delivers on that promise.

The reason that the Master Plan designates “state-supported higher education” is that higher education contributes a disproportionate amount to the protection and empowerment both of individuals and of corporations, and to the creation of a California civilization.

All discussion of moral issues must start there, with the systemic and moral effects of higher education.

From this perspective, the university-as-factory metaphor is not only inaccurate, but is immoral. It is both because it hides all that — all of what public universities are about.

The university-as-factory metaphor sees the university as a factory producing educations in the abstract and selling them to students and/or their parents. All discussion of raising tuition or taking more out-of-state students who pay more tuition is based on that metaphor. The central argument is that students (or their parents) should be paying what the product is worth, economically, over a lifetime, and that they shouldn't be complaining about fee raises because they're getting a relatively good deal.

The factory metaphor misses almost everything. It obviously misses the enormous contribution to the economy of the state as a whole. But it also misses all the other forms of protection and empowerment, as well as shaping California civilization.

The factory metaphor even misses on its own terms; it misses vital economic truths. Yes, if you have a university education, you have the opportunity to make more, perhaps more than a million dollars more over a lifetime, than if you don't. But that also means you will pay a lot more taxes to the state, and the company you work for will make more money. Imagine taking all the extra money that the UC and CSU graduates make for themselves and their companies, and estimating how much more they pay in taxes than if they hadn't gotten a higher education. Now imagine taking all that money that came from a state-supported higher education and using it to support higher education. I suspect there would be no budget shortfall in the universities and a lot left over in profit for everyone. That is what the Economic Engine metaphor claims, namely, that the knowledge and innovation coming from graduates of state-supported universities create far more wealth in the state than the educations cost.

How you look at public higher education is not just a matter of facts and figures, because the question is, which facts and figures do you count? Professor Stan Glantz of UCSF puts the question as one of ideology:

Should higher education be treated as a public good (as envisioned in the Master Plan for Higher Education) or should it be viewed as a private good to be paid for by its customers (students and their families) and voluntary private donors?

The moral issue at stake here is not just about higher education. The issues being played out at the University of California are ultimately the same moral issues being played out on the national stage, on health care, on the environment, on the economy, on foreign policy, and in just about every other issue area. The questions are large. Is Democracy, as President Obama has said, based ultimately on empathy, on citizens caring about one another? Yes, he says, that is why we have principles like freedom and fairness for all, not just the rich and powerful — because we care about our fellow citizens. That is why government has the moral missions of protection and empowerment for all, equally.

But not everyone agrees, especially radical conservatives like Governor Schwarzenegger and many Republican legislators. They ignore the fact that no one makes it on his or her own — without protection and empowerment by the government. They think they did it all themselves and that everyone else should, that no one should pay for anyone else – for anyone else’s health care, for anyone else’s education. And they forget that we have all been paying for the roads they use, the energy grid they use, the educated workers they use, the California wines they drink, the public health services they depend on, the courts they depend on, the research that makes their profits rise, and much, much more.

The privatization issue goes well beyond public education. It is about whether we have a democracy that works for the common good, or a plutocracy that privileges the wealthy and powerful. Privatizing the world’s greatest public university is a giant step away from democracy.

What is especially scary is that many in the UC administration appear willing to go along with privatization, assuming it is inevitable. The attitude seems to be that if we make enough cuts, raise tuition enough, and reduce the number of students, we can still be a great university, though a smaller private one. It is an illusion. Democracy and greatness go hand-in-hand here. Many of our greatest talents were attracted to UC *because* it is a great *public* university. In the process of cutting and plutocratizing the university, that talent will be lost and not replenished for a long time. The administration should be taking every step possible to avoid privatization.

Let me now return to my colleague’s moral dilemma about letting in many more out-of-state students. Here is his internal debate:

Pro: If we let many more out-of-state students in to get their higher tuition, it will not only provide a short-term fix to the lack of funds, but will also be “a brain-

vacuuming scheme to get smart people to come here because (in our case) they tend to stay and create lots of value that spreads across the whole state society.”

Con: “One of the reasons I like to go to work in the morning here is the number of students I have who are the first in their families to ever go to college, and I know a hard-ass loan-only scheme will discourage a lot of them even if it shouldn't.”

The Pro argument neglects the fact that the out-of-state students attracted to a high-tuition UC campus will be those who can afford it, the more wealthy students. And for each such additional wealthy student (who could get a good education elsewhere), a relatively poor or struggling middle-class student will be denied a chance at a great education (as well as a chance to get wealthier). I say the Con argument wins overwhelmingly on moral grounds. It is ultimately the argument for democracy over plutocracy.

The issues at UC cannot be considered in a vacuum. The Governor’s determination to privatize UC is part of a larger radical conservative agenda, statewide as well as nationwide.

We have been plunged into political waters. To save this university, we will have to swim in them.

Stan Glantz suggests that the faculty do everything possible to inject the privatization issue (democracy vs. plutocracy) into the gubernatorial campaign. Governors matter, since a Governor has a line-item veto and can cut the university at will.

Right now, the 2/3 majority needed to raise revenue or pass a budget, allows for a 1/3 plus 1 Republican minority to override a significant Democratic legislative majority chosen by the voters. I am working to get a one-sentence ballot initiative on the November 2010 ballot: *All legislative actions on revenue and budget shall be determined by majority rule.*

Both are needed. If you feel powerless, you aren't. There are many things, great and small, you can do to help.

Meanwhile, we should be clear: privatization the main issue. It will take work to stop it.