

California Higher Education's Hollow Core

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - August 29, 2012

"I look to the diffusion of light and education," wrote Thomas Jefferson in 1822, "as the resource to be relied on for ameliorating the condition, promoting the virtue, and advancing the happiness of man."

Thus the 79-year-old Founding Father -- principal author of the Declaration of Independence, first secretary of state, third president of the United States, and founder of the University of Virginia -- reaffirmed his life-long conviction that the American experiment in self-government depended on the quality of citizens' education.

The people of California might seem to agree. Echoing Jefferson's wise words, their state constitution provides that "A general diffusion of knowledge and intelligence being essential to the preservation of the rights and liberties of the people, the Legislature shall encourage by all suitable means the promotion of intellectual, scientific, moral, and agricultural improvement."

Unfortunately for the citizens of the nation's most populous state -- and, because it is a bellwether, for citizens of the whole nation -- California legislators are betraying their constitutional duty and thereby thwarting the people's abiding interest in cultivating a citizenry capable of conserving liberty and promoting the public interest.

That is the chastening but not unexpected conclusion of "Best Laid Plans: The Unfulfilled Promise of Public Higher Education in California," a wide-ranging and well-documented report recently released by The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA).

"Best Laid Plans" recognizes the distinctive achievements of the three pillars of California public higher education. The California Community Colleges system offers open access and a stepping-stone toward a four-year degree; it "is now the largest higher education system in the nation, serving 2.6 million students annually."

The regionally based and teaching-focused California State system "is one of the largest multi-campus BA and MA programs in the world." And the University of California system, which educates top undergraduates, trains doctoral students, and provides professional education in law, medicine, and business "can boast of having among its current and emeriti faculty nine Nobel Laureates, 32 MacArthur Fellows, 141 members of the National Academy of Sciences, and four Pulitzer Prize winners."

Long the gold standard of public higher education in America, California's three-pillared system is today on a collision course with harsh fiscal realities and exemplifies the gutting of liberal education across the country. To be sure, the state's straitened finances have hit California public higher education hard. But the most serious infirmities of California taxpayer-funded colleges and universities, ACTA shows, are self-inflicted.

Some reflect the failure to manage effectively forces that have been inflating the nationwide higher education bubble. The cost of attending college, greatly outpacing the rate of inflation almost everywhere, has skyrocketed in California: Whereas nationwide tuition and fees at public universities over the last five years have risen on average by 28 percent, the average increase at UC campuses is an astounding 73.1 percent and, at Cal State campuses a still more astounding 83.8 percent. While turning away students and seeking billions for new buildings, California institutions are significantly under-using classroom and laboratory space. And, absent drastic reform, in little more than a decade the Cal State and UC systems are unlikely to be able to meet their obligations to faculty retirement programs.

More menacing to higher education in California is educators' adoption of curricula, classroom pedagogy, and limitations on free speech that fly in the face of liberal education's fundamental requirements. These practices also fly in the face of public opinion.

A Roper survey (commissioned by ACTA) shows that the public by a wide margin favors a required core college curriculum, with strongest support for it coming from those ages 25-34. Nevertheless, California universities neglect general education courses, which ACTA defines as "broad in scope, exposing the student to the rich array of material that characterizes the subject."

The situation is less severe among the 23 Cal State campuses: Almost all require undergraduate general education courses in composition, government and history, math, and sciences. In the elite UC system, however, the situation is dismal.

Berkeley and Davis, according to ACTA, lack general education requirements worthy of the name in composition, literature, foreign language, government and history, economics, math, and science. Of the nine UC campuses, only Santa Barbara imposes a substantial general education requirement in literature, and only UCLA in a foreign language. No UC campus requires in government and history or in economics a basic course of the sort that introduces students to the fundamentals, scope, and significance of the subject.

California higher education, moreover, undermines academic freedom by both abolishing proper obligations and imposing improper restrictions. In 2003, the system opened the door to classroom indoctrination by replacing guidelines that obliged professors to present inconvenient facts and alternative points of view with guidelines that merely direct them to offer students conclusions based on "professional standards of inquiry."

Those who doubt that politicization can permeate professional standards and swallow disciplines whole can quickly disabuse themselves of such naiveté by attending the annual national conferences of the Modern Language Association or the Middle East Studies Association.

Nor are expressions of opinion outside the classroom safe on California campuses. U.S. Supreme Court decisions interpreting the First Amendment protection of speech disallow exceptions for hate speech and generally prohibit speech restrictions based on content. And a 2006 California law bars public colleges and universities from punishing students for constitutionally protected speech.

Nevertheless, reports ACTA (drawing on a study by the indispensable Foundation for Individual Rights in Education), “every single public college or university in the state of California has adopted restrictive speech and harassment codes that inhibit free speech and permit the politicization of the classroom.”

Only last month, the UC president’s own Advisory Council on Campus Climate, Culture, and Inclusion illustrated the withering of universities’ instincts for freedom by issuing a report -- currently under review -- calling on UC President Mark Yudof to “adopt a hate speech-free campus policy.”

The California Board of Regents has a moral, political, and legal duty to compel professors and university administrators to do their job, which is to educate students for liberty. If the regents can’t or won’t, and if the legislature refuses to exercise its oversight responsibilities mandated by the California Constitution, the people of California should rouse themselves, rally, and demand an accounting, since liberal education is crucial to their freedom, prosperity, and happiness.

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