

Public Research Universities in Trouble?

To many outsiders, American universities remain "the envy of the world," to quote a recent editorial in *The Economist* of July 24, 2008. Yet, to many of us who work in the public sector of American higher education, things don't look so rosy. It is not just the result of the latest dip in the states' budget cycles as the national economy lingers on the edge of recession, always particularly deep in my state of California given that state's reliance on capital gains tax revenues, but the overall sense that popular support for what we do is on the wane. Fully 75 percent of all U.S. undergraduate students are enrolled in the public sector, many of them in universities that have long been intellectually competitive with the major private universities: the so-called public research universities. Yet the sector has had ten very bad years and there is no evidence that a corner will be turned any time soon. How has this happened and with what consequences? Why should we as geographers care?

What are the signs of trouble? One is the relative decline in the number of eligible students gaining entry and finishing their degrees in exactly those institutions, the public research universities, which have historically provided the best access to quality higher education for the bulk of the population. The private research universities have always educated far fewer students. That is what they do. Yet, simultaneously, the number of students per professor has increased significantly in the public universities, as funding for faculty positions has failed to keep up with student numbers. Another sign of trouble is the precipitous decline in the level of financial support that states provide to their research universities. In his recent book, *Unmaking the Public University* (Harvard University Press, 2008), Christopher Newfield points out, among many things, that in terms of funds available for essential campus operations state funding has dropped dramatically

over the past ten years. To fill the gap, fees charged to students have been going up, cutting accessibility, particularly for poorer and working students. At the same time, the private research universities have been using their massive endowments to raid the public research universities for star faculty and forcing the public universities into abandoning or significantly adapting their step-based merit pay review or across the board salary systems in order to compete with them. Competing for graduate students is following the same path, as fellowship support dries up relative to the private sector.

Immediately behind these trends lies a fiscal crisis in public higher education, voters have an increased aversion to paying taxes and tend to see state spending overall as wasteful, and what Newbold calls the "tuition trap," which comes about when universities raise fees, talk about how great they are still doing, and voters take away from this the idea that the universities do not need more public money. More fundamentally, perhaps, and since the 1980s, politicians and those of us in public higher education have failed to make the case that the American public university systems have not only been crucial in U.S. economic development and in encouraging upward social mobility but also in democratizing the idea of quality higher education itself as something potentially available to anyone. Complacency about past success continuing without much effort into the future and the all too easy assumption that possible privatization would not change the role of universities in any profound way, usually associated plausibly only with so-called flagship campuses like UC, Berkeley and Michigan, Ann Arbor, have discouraged much open discussion of the crisis.

Bad publicity from the overpayment of university managers is probably a contributory factor. More important overall, and reflective of the times, is the widespread failure to see the significance of the "public" in public universities.

Sustaining the quality of U.S. public higher education is vital in any number of respects. The ability of a society to prosper

and progress depends on the innovativeness and critical thinking that come from exposure to the best ideas and the latest techniques. Increasingly, other countries have taken a leaf out of what used to be the American book. Indeed, many countries now educate more students to a higher level than does the United States. South

Korea, Japan, Canada, and Russia, to name a few, have higher numbers of people in the 25-34 age bracket with an undergraduate education or better. The private sector will never fill this gap. It is precisely the commitment to the idea that higher education should be broadly available and relatively inexpensive that is now increasingly in doubt. Public higher education is an investment in the public good. It is this connection that has been lost.

Why write about this in the *AAG Newsletter*? We should care deeply about the negative trends in public higher education because as a university subject geography is deeply entrenched in this sector. This is where our future as a discipline lies, whether we like it or not. We all have a collective stake in making *The Economist's* editorial comment more than just a memory. ■

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