

Will Universities Rediscover Their Core Mission as They Shrink?

Adam Kissel

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If we intend to speculate about the effects of the bursting of the higher education bubble, we can gain some insight by examining universities that are already shrinking. The University of California (UC) system's state appropriation, for example, has decreased by almost a billion dollars since 2007–2008. According to a July 2011 UC system document, the system has cut costs in response: “UC has implemented layoffs, consolidated and eliminated programs, increased class sizes, delayed faculty hiring, reduced levels and hours of service,” and found “administrative efficiencies.” The system is saying that it has cut *everything* it can, believe it or not, and as a last resort has increased tuition in order to maintain “quality.”¹

Quality? Is the University of California getting back to the basics of its core mission? The overall mission of the ten UC campuses is that they “open their doors to all who work hard and dream big. Through its teaching, research and public service, UC drives California’s economy and leads the world in new directions.”² Behind these generalities is the work of a pretty serious November 2010 report from UC’s sci-fi-sounding “Commission on the Future.” “The future cannot be avoided,” the commission argues

¹Carolyn McMillan, “State Budget Shortfall Forces Second Fee Increase for Fall 2011,” University of California, UC Newsroom, July 11, 2011, <http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/article/25942>.

²University of California, <http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/>.

prudently enough, and takes as its central theme the need to set real priorities in a future of smaller budgets.³

Among its many recommendations, the commission seeks to reduce students' "time to degree," which they say could be accomplished if more instructors taught core course requirements and fewer electives, since many students today cannot find room in the classes they need for graduation. Time to degree is a key factor when thinking about the higher education bubble. UC Riverside's four-year graduation rate is 39 percent; at Davis the rate is 50 percent.⁴ Nationally, the four-year graduation rate for public universities in 2008 was only 29 percent, and the *six*-year rate was only 54.7 percent.⁵ As more prospective students—and their parents—realize just how much of young people's lives is spent pursuing college degrees rather than other things, more will opt for the alternatives. Yet, if colleges can prove that they can get students through a bachelor's degree in four years without sacrificing "quality," more prospective students will stay in the college admissions market. After all, two to four extra years spent earning money rather than paying tuition is a good deal.

Reducing time to degree is not just a matter of meeting the expectation that a four-year degree will take most students four years to earn. It also demonstrates that a college actually knows what it's doing with its curriculum—admitting the kind of students who are best matched to the programs that are offered, retaining them, and giving them the resources they need to succeed. The fact that so many colleges have such poor graduation rates offers a huge locus of impetus for curricular improvement.

⁰University of California Commission on the Future, *Final Report* (Oakland, CA: University of California, November 2010), 2, http://ucfuture.universityofcalifornia.edu/presentations/cof_final_report.pdf. The UC Academic Council had criticized an earlier draft of the report and its recommendations because

[t]he Working Groups pay tribute to the mission of the University, but their discussion does not return to these values, with the result that their recommendations are driven by fiscal expediency, rather than justified by values. An exception to this is the Education and Curriculum Working Group's attempt to define "UC quality." The Academic Council hopes that these, and any forthcoming recommendations, are measured by the extent to which they preserve core principles.

University of California Academic Council, "Memorandum to the UC Commission on the Future," June 11, 2010, 2, http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/senate/reports/HCP2Yudof_FirstRound_Senate_Comment61110.pdf.

⁴Allen Grove, "UC Riverside—SAT Scores, Costs and Admissions Data," About.com, <http://collegeapps.about.com/od/collegeprofiles/p/ucr-riverside.htm>, and "UC Davis—SAT Scores, Costs and Admissions Data," About.com, <http://collegeapps.about.com/od/collegeprofiles/p/uc-davis.htm>.

⁵National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, *Tracking Students to 200 Percent of Normal Time: Effect on Institutional Graduation Rates*, Issue Brief NCES 2011–211 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, December 2010), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011221.pdf>.

The UC commission admirably points out that reducing time to degree is a matter best determined by the faculty and is an issue that requires serious curricular thought: “Re-examining the curriculum to prune and rationalize requirements, especially at the department level, will require an investment of faculty time.”⁶ Rationalizing requirements is no small matter; it requires investigation of the knowledge most worth having, an eternal question about which one may read many books, even some good ones.⁷

But does the UC commission really mean to prune *requirements*? Sadly, the answer is yes. In the words of the commission’s recommendation, pruning entails “re-examining curriculum requirements and policies to ensure that they are not overly burdensome.”⁸ It’s easy, I guess, to let students ricochet their way through college, pinball style, simply amassing a magic number of credit hours by hitting enough of the bumpers. On the faculty side of the equation, if not enough instructors are teaching the required courses, the path of least resistance is to abolish the requirements—not to ensure that more professors (or even graduate students) teach them.

Economically, however, abolishing electives is the better choice. Having a full faculty member teach an upper-level elective course to a small number of undergraduates is expensive compared with having that individual lead a large section of a lower-level required course. As the air seeps out of the higher education bubble and colleges feel the pressure to focus on the core mission, I see some colleges dramatically reducing electives rather than pruning requirements. For schools that focus on general education, that will mean more emphasis on “core curriculum”; for schools that focus on helping students find specialized jobs, that will mean more emphasis on each student’s major.

The intellectual consequence of having electives is a matter of debate going back more than a century. In 1900, a generation or so into Harvard’s decision to emphasize electives, one critic said:

The average youth will always neglect the hard thing and choose the easiest study. For instance, he will neglect Latin, Greek, and mathematics and prefer in their place something light and easy. Harvard approves, nay,

⁶UC Commission on the Future, *Final Report*, 9.

⁷See Wayne C. Booth, ed., *The Knowledge Most Worth Having* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) and Donald N. Levine, *Powers of the Mind: The Reinvention of Liberal Learning in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁸UC Commission on the Future, *Final Report*, 11.

coddles him, for his poor choice, and gives him an A.B. if he knows nothing but a French comedy or the chemical properties of animal fat. Such a graduate is certainly not an educated person....[Harvard] President Eliot is a proof of my statement. His mind, as shown in his zigzag argument [for electives], reminds me of a “buckled saw” which...twists in the hand and will not cut the wood.⁹

Yet, on the other side of the argument, we have a university model where students are free adults, where universities no longer function *in loco parentis*, where taking your chances in the marketplace of ideas means the prospect of following intellectual paths that are bankrupt or likely to be useless, but where you might make an intellectual connection that really takes you somewhere. If you are a gender studies major who also wants to learn about animal fat, who am I to say whether you’re making a mistake? If the gender studies department thinks an elective in animal fat is worth your time, why should I second-guess the department?

So, is student choice fundamental to an academic “core,” or is something else at the heart of the mission of the modern or postmodern university? Let’s look at the mission statements of some universities to find out.

The Idea of a Research University

In its “Philosophy of Purpose,” posted on the UC Davis website, the word “education” appears eight times, “knowledge” six times, “teaching” four times, and “learning” twice. “Diversity” appears twice in the context of disciplinary diversity and only once in the sense of a diverse student body “consonant with the citizenry of California.” For example,

UC Davis offers a diverse array of post-baccalaureate programs. Drawing upon the wide range of specialized academic fields, stimulating cross-disciplinary approaches, and using its distinctive graduate groups, a

⁹“Dr. [Henry A.] Brann Attacks Harvard,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1900, <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=F0061EF7385D12738DDDAE0A94DE405B808CF1D3>. Today at Harvard, even the core courses have much of the character of electives. For example, a Harvard student can fulfill the general education requirement in Aesthetic and Interpretive Understanding this year by taking any of twenty courses or an additional twenty-five cross-listed courses. Instead of studying French comedy, students can enroll in AI 26, “Race, Gender, and Performance,” and read Eve Ensler, Ntozake Shange, Judith Butler, Anna Deavere Smith, Cherríe Moraga, David Henry Hwang, Bertolt Brecht, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña in order to discuss “transgressive and normative gender, feminist and queer theatre, athletics, gender in everyday life, drag, AIDS, and weddings”; <http://webdocs.registrar.fas.harvard.edu/courses/AestheticandInterpretiveUnderstanding.html>.

structure that permits students to pursue lines of inquiry that cross traditional disciplinary lines, UC Davis continues to follow and redefine the mandate of a major research university.¹⁰

So, if a major research university such as UC Davis is looking for peripheral activities to cut, pruning *neither* requirements *nor* electives looks like a first choice. When there is so much interdisciplinary teaching and inquiry going on, it's hard to tell the difference between central activities and mere electives. If students really learn something from connecting diverse areas of knowledge, perhaps in the style of Hermann Hesse's *Magister Ludi*, why prune any courses in the first place and thereby nip interesting new ideas in the bud? In contrast, it would be consistent with the mission of UC Davis to look for cuts in areas of less emphasis and centrality, and budget cutters could point directly to the university's own philosophy of purpose for their rationale.

Heather Mac Donald has recently argued, however, that many of the UC schools have "diversity machines" that focus on identity groups rather than intellectual and disciplinary diversity and that they are more likely to keep growing like kudzu than to be rooted out.¹¹ In a time of budget cuts and a lack of data showing very much (if any) bang for the buck in social and cultural diversity programs, perhaps this is an area for pruning.¹² Indeed, UC Davis has an Office of Campus Community Relations and a Campus Council on Community and Diversity, which released a "Diversity Campus Action Plan" with an outline of a "Hate Free Campus Initiative" in 2010.¹³ I am not arguing that the plan and initiative do not have merit. But if the choice is between an academic course and administrative and other costs involved with the "Annual Principles of Community Celebration Week," the "Reaffirming Ethnic Awareness and Cultural Harmony (REACH) Retreat," the "Hate-Free Campus Distinguished Speakers Series," the "Campus

¹⁰Office of the Registrar, UC Davis, "Philosophy of Purpose," Mission Statement, <http://registrar.ucdavis.edu/ucdwebcatalog/mission.html>.

¹¹Heather Mac Donald, "Less Academics, More Narcissism: The University of California Is Cutting Back on Many Things, but Not Useless Diversity Programs," *City Journal*, July 14, 2011, <http://www.city-journal.org/2011/cjc0714hm.html>.

¹²It would be interesting, for example, to compare graduation rates (by demographic group) with per-student spending on diversity programs. (If such studies exist, I am not aware of them.) Some schools have done better than others in improving retention and graduation rates.

¹³Office of Campus Community Relations, University of California, "Campus Council on Community and Diversity Campus Action Plan and Outline of the Hate Free Campus Initiative," <http://occr.ucdavis.edu/hatefree.html>.

Community Book Project,” and the various UC-sponsored ideological activities of the Cross Cultural Center,¹⁴ which would a prudent citizen want UC Davis to choose? Which choice is more central to the university’s real mission?

An additional problem is that the university’s mission may say one thing, but its practices all too often demonstrate something else. The UC Davis School of Medicine has made the UC Davis “Principles of Community” mandatory since 2010, subjecting students to *academic probation* if they fail to “acknowledge that our society carries within it historical and deep-rooted misunderstandings and biases,” show “the highest standards of civility,” show “courtesy, sensitivity and respect,” “cherish the richness contributed to our lives by our diversity,” or base their actions on “caring.”¹⁵ In addition, the university’s “Sustainable 2nd Century” website claims that it springs from “UC Davis’ long-term commitment to environmental, economic and social sustainability.”¹⁶ This moral, social, economic, and environmental *agenda* is not actually to be found in the university’s mission statement. To be sure, the mission statement emphasizes *study* of the “environment” (three times), but not from such an ideological point of view.

At any rate, it seems that UC Davis has been thinking a lot about pruning administration in general, if not cultural diversity and sustainability programs in particular. In a February 2011 report, the university acknowledged that “over 70% of campus expenses are for personnel costs,” and that at least “450–500 staff positions” were on the chopping block.¹⁷ This includes a line item to “consolidate, close or outsource services that are not mandated or are not unique or core to UC Davis.”¹⁸ At a university like UC Davis, focusing on the core mission means emphasizing education, knowledge, teaching,

¹⁴UC Davis Cross Cultural Center, “About Us,” <http://ccc.ucdavis.edu/about.html>.

¹⁵UC Davis Office of Campus Community Relations, “The Principles of Community,” <http://occr.ucdavis.edu/poc/>, and UC Davis School of Medicine, “Bylaws and Regulations,” <http://www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/medschool/somsenate/Bylaws-of-the-School-of-Medicine-19Nov2010.pdf>.

¹⁶Office of Environmental Stewardship and Sustainability, UC Davis, Sustainable 2nd Century, <http://sustainability.ucdavis.edu/>.

¹⁷Chancellor Linda P.B. Katehi and Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor Ralph J. Hexter to President Mark G. Yudof, UC Davis, letter, February, 23, 2011, 3, http://budget.ucdavis.edu/budget-planning/documents/Yudof_budget_letter_2-23-11.pdf. Just one week earlier, UC Davis was subject to the embarrassing revelation that it had defined U.S. religious discrimination in a discriminatory way as “institutionalized oppressions toward those who are not Christian,” in a “Principles of Community” diversity glossary. “UC Davis Removes Web Wording That Upset Christians,” Associated Press, February 17, 2011, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2011/02/17/uc-davis-removes-web-wording-upset-christians/>.

¹⁸Katehi and Hexter, letter, 6.

learning, disciplinary diversity—and cutting administration. If UC Davis is going to be honest about its true mission, a lot of the cultural diversity and sustainability administrators should be the ones to go, leaving in place the necessary support staff for the university's academic mission. The alternatives are to lie about the university's mission, to ignore it, or to change it to reflect what the university really values.

The Idea of a Social Justice University

How about a private, metropolitan institution like Roosevelt University in Chicago? Roosevelt presents a valuable point of comparison because it also is shrinking, with an expected \$7.8 million “budget shortfall” due to much lower student enrollment projections than expected for 2011–2012.¹⁹

According to its mission statement,

Roosevelt University is a national leader in educating socially conscious citizens for active and dedicated lives as leaders in their professions and their communities....Deeply rooted in practical scholarship and principles of social justice expressed as ethical awareness, leadership development, economic progress and civic engagement, Roosevelt University encourages community partnerships and prepares its diverse graduates for responsible citizenship in a global society.²⁰

Here you have a very different kind of university. Nevertheless, Roosevelt's six-year graduation rate is only 38 percent,²¹ and when it comes time for Roosevelt to prove that it is worth yearly tuition and fees totaling \$25,000 (plus \$11,508 for room and board),²² one would only expect that it would refocus around its core mission of social justice. Electives that are less relevant to this mission are going to go first.

It should not be much of a surprise, then, that the Roosevelt Adjunct Faculty Organization (RAFO) recently estimated that the university's 2011–2012 budget “would cut 235 classes from the fall schedule, reduce courses taught by adjunct

¹⁹Patrick Garrett, “Budget Cuts Target Education,” *Roosevelt Torch*, July 6, 2011, <http://www.roosevelttorch.com/sections/news/budget-cuts-target-education-1.2604124>.

²⁰Roosevelt University, Mission of the University, <http://www.roosevelt.edu/About/Mission.aspx>.

²¹U.S. News & World Report Rankings, Best Colleges 2011, “Roosevelt University,” *U.S. News & World Report*, <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/roosevelt-university-1749/rankings>.

²²Roosevelt University, “Fall 2011–Spring 2012 Tuition and Fees,” <http://www.roosevelt.edu/TuitionAndFees.aspx>. Tuition increased by \$2,000 (8.7 percent) over the previous year.

faculty by 22%, and ‘cut an estimated 75 part-time teachers.’”²³ But RAFO Vice President Jen Sarno is trying to make the old “electives” argument stick by aligning it with Roosevelt’s central mission: “Students should have as many [class] choices as possible,” she argues, to “maximize fairness and fulfill the Social Justice principles the University was founded on.”²⁴

This argument might work, and it might have the added benefit of returning Roosevelt to its first principles. Which electives truly serve the university’s mission, and which ones are truly optional? Unlike a school that focuses primarily on knowledge creation and dissemination—“lead[ing] the world in new directions,” as the UC system advertises—Roosevelt probably does not need to worry much about disciplinary diversity. Roosevelt University is not a major research university, nor does it need to be. To be sure, Roosevelt students would lose out on some of their intellectual options if certain areas of study were to disappear, but perhaps these are more of the animal fat variety, and the fat must be cut.

The Roosevelt adjuncts are also trying to persuade the administration to cut its own fat. At a June 2011 “vigil,” adjunct faculty members shouted, “Chop, chop, chop from the top!”²⁵ But the administration of what Heather Mac Donald calls the “diversity machine” will remain for a long time to come because it is at the center of this university.

The point of this comparison is to demonstrate that when the higher education bubble bursts, each university will react in its own way. The natural prediction is that universities will retreat into their core values and mission. For some, such as UC Davis, this will mean the goals of the classic research and teaching university; for places like Roosevelt, it will mean diversity and social justice programming. For other schools, it will mean an actual “core curriculum”; for yet others, specialized vocational programs. Some presidents will make budgetary mistakes that cut into the core, and then be properly chastised when the campus community rises up to protect what they thought the university had been offering. Roosevelt, which has no classics department, nevertheless has interdisciplinary programs in social justice studies and women’s and gender studies. These would seem to be the very last things to cut.²⁶ In contrast, if UC

²³Garrett, “Budget Cuts Target Education.”

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Roosevelt only has history and philosophy departments. Roosevelt University, “All Undergraduate and Graduate Program Listings,” <http://www.roosevelt.edu/Catalog/Programs.aspx>.

Davis is honest about its own mission, it is hard to imagine how its classics program (which now includes studies in Arabic, Hebrew, and Hindi/Urdu) could ever be expendable.²⁷

The U.S. higher education market is quite variegated and specialized already, but a shrinking supply of tuition and government dollars will further differentiate the market. Students, their parents, and government subsidizers are going to demand that each university do a better job of proving that it is living up to its stated mission and graduating students in accordance with that mission. Some employers of college graduates want targeted job skills matched with specific majors—or at least enough skills so that new employees won't need remedial help in reading, writing, and thinking. Others want well-rounded graduates with open minds who can read, write, and think for themselves.

How many employers will want students whose education didn't open their minds but instead indoctrinated them with particular ideological views and “social justice” values? Is there enough of a market for that kind of college graduate, or will we see more such schools close, as Antioch did? Time will tell.

I predict that as universities shrink and higher education loses air—more like a hissing tire than a bursting bubble—the pressure of competition will rise as we've never seen it before, and colleges will feel the need to make clear what their core missions are and what they really stand for.

²⁷The other studies were folded into classics in 2009. Classics, UC Davis, “New Languages in the Classics Program,” <http://classics.ucdavis.edu/news/past-ne/new-members-of-the-classics-program>.