

California Dreaming: The Past, Present, and Future of Continuing and Higher Education in California

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Editor's Note: We asked Gary Matkin, Dean of Continuing Education, Distance Learning, and Summer Session at the University of California, Irvine and long-time member of UPCEA, to talk about his experience with higher and continuing education in California. The situation of public universities has changed considerably, and Gary Matkin's 43 years as an undergraduate, graduate, and administrator have given him a privileged perspective on the evolution of California higher education, particularly the University of California system.

THE GOLDEN AGE

The 1960-1975 Master Plan for Higher Education in California was adopted at the time I graduated from Amos Alonso Stagg Senior High School in Stockton, CA. My family could not pay for my college education, so I applied for every scholarship I could. You can imagine my relief when I received a letter from Bernard Marmaduke of the State of California, informing me that I had been awarded a California merit scholarship. This scholarship guaranteed me full tuition at any California 4-year public or private college or university. Imagine! A few weeks later, I entered a scholarship competition at St. Mary's high school in Stockton. The scholarship was for the University of San Francisco (USF) and again,

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and to my surprise, I won! Now I had two full tuition scholarships. When I told USF that I was a California merit scholar, the institution converted my tuition scholarship to a full room and board scholarship for four years. I had my college almost fully paid for.

I graduated in four years and went to work for a “big eight” accounting firm. Two years (the required minimum apprentice period) and two weeks after entering public accounting I left the field, CPA license in hand. And again I entered the California higher education system as an MBA candidate at UC Berkeley (UCB). This time I did not have a scholarship, but benefited from very low tuition (\$320 per year in 1968).

In many respects, this was a kind of golden age for higher education in California: state government recognized the importance of providing students like me access to higher education, taxpayers were willing to subsidize quality postsecondary education, and the various public components of public higher education recognized their roles in a well-articulated system, from community colleges through the California State Universities to the University of California (UC). Any high-school graduate in California had the opportunity to find a place in public higher education. Education wasn’t completely free; students had to pay “auxiliary costs” for things such as dormitories or recreational facilities, but for students of my generation, a college education was within reach.

Today academically promising California students who are economically disadvantaged are having a more difficult time securing funding for their higher education. The California merit-scholars program has been discontinued and financial aid of all kinds is more difficult to get. Much of this has to do with reductions in free financial aid of the kind I received due to public (federal and state) budget reductions. But there are other factors. Larger numbers of Hispanic and African Americans and other economically disadvantaged groups are now in the pool of potential students eligible for such aid. They are often less informed of their options. The escalating academic requirements of all sectors of public higher education, particularly the UC campuses, intimidate lower-income students. And there is evidence that there is a greater diversity of high-school preparation across the state so that a top performer from one high school might find herself struggling in relationship to such students with a richer high-school experience. However, there are still significant opportunities. Many financial aid programs do still exist, including Pell Grants. While budget cuts have sharply reduced California’s ability to directly fund deserving and promising students,

the Community Colleges, CSU, and UC systems are very active in preserving access for motivated California college students.

Of course, the financing of higher education is not the only element of change in the last 50 years (from 1962 when I entered college to today). Demographic change, curricular shifts (new subjects, majors, and interdisciplinary programs), new technologies, huge increases in physical plant, and many other changes make it difficult for me to place myself in the role of a current undergraduate. Just walking into the modern campus library is for me a dramatic reminder of how out of touch I am. First, of course, there are few books visible and students sit together in groups with laptops, iPads, and smart phones in front of them. And herein lies a problem. The people still in charge of higher education (my generation and say, 30 years younger) grew up in an education system starkly different from today's. How can we effectively make plans for the future without an understanding that the student's of today are "wired" differently in their approaches to learning and to using the results of their learning? This is a subject for further consideration.

However, back in the "golden age" there were significant issues facing California higher education that we tend to forget. Not everything was perfect. During this time I witnessed first-hand one of the crises that California higher education and the UC system faced. I lived about three blocks from People's Park, which I passed every morning on my way to class. I suffered from the helicopter tear gas attack by the activated National Guard as I walked to the library just above Sproul Plaza. These attacks followed Governor Reagan's firing of Clark Kerr, the first president of the UC and author of the Master Plan for Higher Education in California. It's hard to imagine a more vigorous, active, and more shockingly physical attack by the state government on a public institution of such public renown. And 43 years later, it is difficult for me to convey the sense of crisis felt at UC. While I experienced it as a student and victim, it was clear that the University and the state administration were at war. But despite these conflicts, the system was strong enough to allow people like me to get an education.

I graduated from UCB with an MBA in 1970, went to work in the corporate world (again as an accountant) and then on July 1, 1973 accepted a position at UCB Extension as a business and budget officer. This began my career as a continuing educator at the UC. I immediately became involved in the senior administration of Extension and for the next 27 years advanced to the position of associate dean. Under the mentorship and leadership of

Dean Milton Stern, I was at various times responsible for all organizational units at UCB Extension, both administrative and academic. In 1975, I was accepted to UCB's doctoral program in higher education and eventually earned my "terminal" degree in 1989. This began my long-term study of higher education, conducted in part, as a participant in the experience of UC as both an elite and public university.

OPPORTUNITY AND CRISIS

I became Dean of Continuing Education at UC Irvine (UCI) in March 2000. At that time, the UC system was still robust, and new opportunities were emerging at all levels. During my tenure at UCB, I had responsibility for the Center of Media and Independent Learning (CMIL), one of the pioneers in university online education, starting with a Sloan Foundation grant in 1994. I brought this experience to UCI and in 2001, the Executive Vice Chancellor chartered the UCI Distance Learning Center (UCIDLC) under my direction. Its first project was the development and delivery of UC's first (and for five years only) online degree program, a Masters of Advanced Study in Criminology, Law, and Society offered through the School of Social Ecology. The UCIDLC developed high-quality, faculty-led graduate courses and also was involved in the administration and marketing of the program for its first two years. The program is currently in its ninth cohort and has graduated 142 students.

Somewhat new to me was the responsibility for UCI's Summer Session, through which I saw great opportunity for programmatic synergies. The combination of managing continuing education, distance learning and summer session is unique in the UC system and in higher education. But this combination is reflective of the difference I found in my transition from Berkeley to Irvine. While my heart will always have a place for UCB, professionally it was energizing to come to a very new institution focused on building its reputation and more willing perhaps to try new things. Operating from a very sound financial position initially with an organization composed of people with high motivation and creativity, I was able assume the risks—both financial and reputational—of new ventures.

Certainly part of the energy and excitement of working at UCI was that the campus was growing and that growth was being funded by the state. For several years, UCI's total enrollment increased by 1,000 students per year. With additional funding, new programs could be created without shifting resources from existing programs. In fact, UCI's entire history has been

one of constant growth, although not always steady and without financial issues. The UC system and the state of California under both Governor Davis and Schwarzenegger honored a pact that guaranteed state funding for enrollment growth at UC. Continuing education, distance learning, and summer session benefited from that growth and improvement, both in direct and indirect ways.

One huge direct benefit continuing education received during this time was the support of the campus when the bottom dropped out of the IT market and 9/11 happened. These events put Extension into a deficit position for several years, but those deficits were covered by the administration until we could turn things around. In tougher economic times for UC as a whole, the situation might have been very different. The positive culture of growth at UCI came to a screeching halt in 2008-2009 when the state reduced UC's budget as it began to face its own deficit. While enrollment growth was scheduled to decline anyway, the budget problems made clear that growth based on state funds was no longer possible. Curiously, while continuing education, distance learning, and summer session benefited from UC's good times, they have also benefited from its bad times. For instance, one response to the budget crisis was to attract more non-resident, full-tuition paying students to fill the spots opened by the reduced state funding. With its very large and successful international programs, Extension was able to help the campus recruit international undergraduates by creating a "pathway" for entering international students. Spurred by financial difficulty, the university and especially UCI became open to the possibilities of online education. Currently the UCIDLC is expanding rapidly and providing highly visible, added value to the UCI campus.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE

Today, California's higher education system and the UC are facing unprecedented challenges as state support diminishes and tuition increases. These challenges are making it difficult to maintain high quality and access for California's diverse students. Despite these challenges, I remain optimistic about California higher education and the UC system. I draw this optimism from my long-term experience and current "participant-observer" status as a dean at UC Irvine (UCI).

As a student in the 1960s, I was a witness to a number of conflicts or difficulties between the university and the state government. However the many budget "crises" do not compare with the UC's current budget difficul-

ties, which are unprecedented in size, scope, and future implications. After a \$500 million budget reduction starting in 2008-2010, the university now faces a \$1 billion shortfall in its core budget with another \$100 million cut on the horizon. Even more destructive is the inability of UC to plan because of the political and financial uncertainty surrounding state financing. While tax increases may provide some relief, such increases are far from assured, and students and parents will face yet another increase in tuition. From this point of view, the current struggles facing California higher education, the UC, and the state, do not compare to the threatening context of the past.

So, why am I optimistic? First, I have seen California higher education and the UC recover from many crises, primarily because of its ability to adapt to the circumstances. Note that higher education in California was not itself responsible for the crisis it is in, except insofar as it might have recognized the problems earlier. The overall cost of higher education in California has not increased over the last ten years—it has actually decreased on a per-student basis. Of course, students and parents are shouldering a larger proportion of the cost as state support shrinks. Second, California's current fiscal situation is bound to improve over time. As the seventh largest economy in the world, California is subject to national and international economic trends, but it has an incredibly diverse and sustainable economy. Also, the terrible state of public financing and political incompetence is coming to the attention of the general public. Third, at least at the UC, there is a strong movement toward becoming less dependent on state funding. This does not mean that the UC will become "privatized." Its commitment to access for California students of all socioeconomic groups remains strong. The UC has increased student tuition at just a bit less than the reduction of state support and has continued to provide financial support to students in need. About one-third of tuition is devoted to financial aid to low income student families. This year, students with a household income of \$80,000 or less did not pay any tuition, while students from families with incomes up to \$120,000 are offered a one-year grant to cover the new fee increase.

But perhaps more importantly for continuing educators, UC is turning to "entrepreneurial" activity to offer graduate degrees at market rates and seeking an expansion of profit producing continuing education. This has meant that UC is looking to its extension divisions for help—weaving continuing education ever more tightly into the fabric of the university.

I have often found the experience of continuing education to be counter-cyclical to that of the economy and the larger university. So perhaps my

optimism is a natural consequence of my history with UC. As gloom hangs over UC, continuing education prospers. But I expect this current crisis will, as with many previous crises, make the university and its public role stronger.

These examples from my personal experience hopefully provide some perspective on the changes in California higher education and in other states. Some common patterns appear to be emerging as illustrated by the California case. The way institutions handle these external forces and how continuing education on campuses react to the spillover effect of these forces is important to both institutions and their continuing education units. The most visible of these forces derive from declines in state support of higher education:

- The tendency to protect flagship campuses to the disadvantage of other state higher education institutions.
- The increased need (at public institutions) to raise tuition and attract non-resident students.
- The turning to entrepreneurial activities and programs.
- The opening up of higher education to technological solutions to cut costs and increase revenues.

This combination of crisis and opportunity, especially for continuing education, make this the most exciting time in my career. 🔄