

# Point of View

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## Being Really Good vs. Being Really Public: Is This Our Choice?

by David A. Hollinger



Let me ask directly a question that our conversations in Berkeley this past year have tended to skirt. In the specific tax environment that now exists in California, does our historic standing as a public university remain compatible with our equally historic standing as a campus of intellectual distinction? It is irresponsible of us as a faculty to continue to avoid this deeply unwelcome question, and to deny collegial support to those of our administrators who are trying to confront it.

It is easy enough to hold forth on the virtues of being public. Perhaps it is even easier to hold forth on the virtues of being excellent. Many of us have been doing a lot of both. And there was a time when doing both simultaneously was more than hollow bravado and wishful thinking. In that era, there appeared to be no structural conflict between being public and being one of the world's leading centers of learning.

But institutions and practices are historically contingent. In recent years there has come into being a set of historical conditions very different from the set that enabled California to achieve a stellar system of higher education. Clark Kerr was able to mobilize widespread support for the Master Plan during a period of prosperity and of diminishing class inequalities. That Plan is increasingly threatened by

the expressed priorities of voters and their elected representatives caught up in the anti-tax politics for which the notorious Proposition 13 of 1978 is an enduring emblem.

The sources of this anti-tax politics are multiple, and have been helpfully analyzed by our social scientists and historians. Perhaps this politics can be reversed? I hope so, and I applaud efforts like those of our colleague George Lakoff (through his ballot initiative to abolish the two-thirds rule in the legislature, enabling simple majorities to mandate higher taxes) to advance this project.

Yet even the most optimistic of souls usually will grant that the project of reversing the anti-tax politics of California is a formidable one, and not likely to be achieved prior to the time that the excellence of the UC

system in general and of Berkeley in particular will be severely challenged by diminished state support. We need to remember that a recent, credible poll found that 69% of California voters prefer to keep Proposition 13 in place. Other polls reveal that opposition to increased income tax for high earners is sustained by the belief of 19% of the American public that they are in the top 1% of income earners, and by the belief of another 20% that they will join that 1% within their lifetimes. California politicians who win elections do not mention services and taxes in the same sentence.

This tax environment is the context in which it is difficult to avoid a dual speculation. Being really public—above all keeping fees low and access high—might require a diminution in the intellectual quality of the services that UC in general and Berkeley in particular offer the state of California. And being really good at what we do—above all maintaining a research faculty of the kind we now have—might require a diminution of the extent to which we are a public university.

If there is a risk that holding the line on being really public will diminish our intellectual quality, perhaps we should take that risk? After all, one could argue that what most matters in a public university is serving the needs of the public, and one could argue that given the more rigid class structure now in place in California, public monies should be devoted to services other than the maintaining of ten research universities. As Peter Schrag, the most perspicacious of the journalists covering state



politics in relation to higher education, asked recently in the pages of *San Francisco Magazine*, does California really need nine doctoral programs in Political Science?

One could argue that the system of public higher education in California, given the current political economy of the state, should be refocused with the priority of providing opportunities for upward social and economic mobility, and that

UC's aspiration to remain one of the great research universities of the world is simply at odds with the most pressing needs of the population of the state. If Berkeley's programs drop from the top five in field after field to somewhere farther down, might this be a price worth paying for keeping costs lower? The Master Plan was fine for 1960. This is not 1960. So, let's be really public, even if it costs some diminution in quality.

The coin is easily turned. If there is a risk that holding the line on being really good will require the degrees of "privatization" that diminish our ability to provide low-fee, high access education to Californians, perhaps we should take that risk? After all, one could argue that a university of genuine intellectual distinction is of great value to California even if fewer Californians than now can attend and if many of those who do attend have to pay a larger share of its cost. Since many of the Californians who protest higher tuition for their children are the same people who will not vote the taxes to enable state support, the species of privatization embodied in higher fees can be construed as an indirect form of taxation. One could also argue that the distinction

between public and private in this domain is not so clear-cut, that steps already taken toward multiple funding streams offer hope that the “hybrid” university can remain distinct from private campuses like Stanford and Caltech. Real excellence pays off for California, and we should not trade it away in return for the garden variety level of intellect that extreme anti-privatization impulses threaten to give us. The Master Plan was fine for 1960. This is not 1960. So, let’s be really good, even if it costs some diminution in public access.



Personally, I yield to no one in my respect for The Master Plan or in my identity with the Berkeley campus. I have served in countless campus capacities as a member of this faculty. Long before that I was a student here. I was in the Free Speech Movement. I came to know and appreciate Clark Kerr. My experiences at Berkeley as a graduate student in the 1960s were transforming. I owe almost everything to Berkeley. I was able to come here because it was really public. But that is not what changed me. Many places were really public. I was changed because Berkeley was really good.

I now believe the risks to quality are more dangerous than the risks to public access. To be sure, if fees go up, fewer people like me could come, but what these people would get will be of greater value. Perhaps I am wrong to prefer this alternative? I hope those who lean the other way will publicly defend the taking of the risk of diminished quality, rather than ignoring the question.

The choice invites comparison to a choice often faced by Berkeley parents, including many who rail with conviction against the “privatization” of UC. Do you keep your children in the public schools even when the signs are that they are not getting the education you want for them? This dilemma comes about as a result of historical forces going back a long way, but when you face the choice it does not help much to speechify about neo-liberalism and its evils. So, too, with the University of California. Berkeley is, in a sense, our child. It is a precious thing for which we have some responsibility. To how much risk are we willing to see it exposed while we are making sure it remains really public?

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