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The Master Plan for Higher Education, the 1960 document that provided the structure of California’s massive and celebrated system of public higher education, was a product of a deeply ingrained political culture in many ways unique to California. John Aubrey Douglass, a research fellow at the Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley, has provided an excellent guide to the historical context of the educational philosophy that runs as a pulse throughout the fabric of California’s political history. *The California Idea and American Higher Education: 1850 to the 1960 Master Plan* shows how a sustained, and at times contradictory, impulse to create an affordable, accessible, and top-quality system of higher education helped to forge California’s socioeconomic matrix. The fact that many states sought to reorganize their systems based upon California’s 1960 model indicates that this effort was largely successful. The “California Idea,” then, is a reference to both a century of ideology and policymaking by educational planners in the state and to the broadly influential implementation of the Master Plan itself.

In its efforts to explore the interconnection between California politics and educational philosophy, Douglass’ book is primarily a study of Progressivism. Specifically, he places the state’s system of public higher education at the center of California Progressivism, flagging four moments when the Progressive impulse flared most acutely within the state’s political culture. The Republican-inspired land grant movement of the 1860s, the Progressive era legislation and institutionalization of moral responsibility of the 1910s, and the expansion of the economy and public institutions prevalent during and immediately after the Second World War are three of these moments. The fourth came with the election of Democrat Edmund G. “Pat” Brown in 1956 and the rise of a newly invigorated state Democratic Party, which took control of the state legislature for the first time in nearly one hundred years. Brown and Democratic labor negotiator Clark Kerr used the Master Plan to consolidate prior strains of Progressive idealism by linking public higher education, both institutionally and ideologically, to the burgeoning political economy of the Cold War.

In each of these epochs, an increased public demand for education contributed to an infusion of state investment in higher education. Political leaders who argued that an integrated educational system was a key component to the building of a civic infrastructure promoted this investment. Demand came from regional sources, as local business and political interests converged to encourage socioeconomic mobility and sustained economic prosperity under capitalism. The influx of regional interests in the political development of the state raised the prospect of a system of mass education in each of these moments. Nonetheless, public higher education in Cal-
California was an elitist system and remained one even after the demographic shifts brought by the Second World War.

The University of California had traditionally served the needs of those who had the resources necessary to meet its rigorous admissions standards, regardless of which region of the state they came from. The junior colleges, by contrast, offered vocational training to young people from their own communities in an effort to increase the level of production of their local economies. In this way, the University could justify its elitism and deflect the growth of a mass system. With the enormous growth in enrollment after the war, however, California’s normal schools, which had provided teacher training since the 1860s, began to assert themselves as liberal arts institutions, threatening the hegemony of the University and junior college nexus. Increased tension between these institutions began to highlight the elitist contradictions in the University’s program, and generated a call for rethinking the means by which notions of civic responsibility had been previously promoted in California’s political culture.

The shape of California’s institutions of public higher education is rooted in legislation dating to the period of the state constitution of 1849. Republican interests pushed through legislation for state and local taxation allowing for the financing of local institutions, including common schools. In 1852, a State Board of Education was created. By 1862, newly elected Republican Governor Leland Stanford advocated government activism in both the social and economic development of the state.

Stanford and other prominent Republicans represented the emergence of a business class that promoted education as a state policy issue in order to develop and regulate the young state’s economy. Their efforts were sanctioned by the federal government, which extended the provisions of the Northwest Ordinance by creating colleges “focused on agricultural and mechanical arts and to promote applied research” (p. 33). The land grant legislation of the Morrill Act of 1862 codified these efforts, providing agricultural, mining, and mechanical education in support of the state’s economy. From this legislation, the University of California emerged as an autonomous and politically powerful institution, especially after 1879 when its Board of Regents was granted sole governing power over the University through a constitutional amendment.

The internal organization of the University would eventually help to mold it into a premier and elite institution. By engaging in research that enabled the state’s industrially based economy to quickly develop into one of the strongest in the nation, the University soon emerged as one of the premier institutions of higher education, public or private, in the nation.

After the turn of the century, a rising middle class took hold in California, made up largely of professionals with an interest in promoting small business and entrepreneurialism. By 1910, this class had attained a measure of public power, fueled by its resentment of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Championing a form of participatory democracy, Progressives denounced monopoly powers such as the Southern Pacific and sought to put government directly into the hands of the people. To do this, they convinced a large block of voters that their movement harbored a special moral responsibility to reform society. Specifically, the idealism that promoted an “increase (in) the value of the worker, bring(ing) better wages and working conditions and open(ing) new possibilities for socioeconomic mobility,” (p. 91) was accomplished through the expansion of institutions and subsequent creation of increased opportunity for more people.

Class reform was of central significance to Progressives, with mobility and egalitarianism at the heart of their ideology, and the state election of 1910 helped to accomplish their goals, bringing a Progressive majority to both houses of the state legislature, as well as the governor’s mansion. The historic 1911 session of the legislature then passed a series of watershed bills, greatly increasing public participation in democracy, including the ballot initiative process, women’s suffrage, cross-filing to promote non-partisan candidates (which would help Earl Warren attain the governor’s office some thirty years later), and, crucially, a call to build a comprehensive system of public higher education. California, Douglass writes, was now “on the crest of a powerful wave rushing to redefine state government and the rights of its citizens” (p. 85).[1]

Progressive reforms, however, highlighted an important contradiction in the University of California’s charter. The University’s autonomy, protected by its isolation from state government, had fostered elitism inconsistent with the egalitarian ideology promoted by reformers. Having grown to resemble a modified, land grant, version of an eastern, liberal arts college, the University’s classical curriculum ran counter to the land grant’s intention of developing the state’s industrial economy through research.

Benjamin Ide Wheeler, appointed UC President in
1899, made the first attempt to address this identity crisis. Wheeler argued that a strong classical curriculum was indeed central to building the University’s reputation as an institution that could draw the best professional talent from around the nation, thereby helping to establish California’s growing national reputation. However, Wheeler reasoned, a top-flight faculty would also enable the school to engage in the kind of research needed to promote the state’s industries, solidifying its role as central to the nation’s economy. In order to bring these competing interests together, Douglass shows, Wheeler convinced the powerful Hearst family to fund a large-scale physical expansion of the Berkeley campus in order to open its facilities to more students, and to endow department chairs and scholarships. Simultaneously, Wheeler was able to convince taxpayers that they had a civic responsibility to contribute to the funding of the day to day operations of the University in order to create a pool of skilled labor that could sustain and even expand the state’s burgeoning economy.

Wheeler did not intend that expanding access to the University should dilute the quality of education that the school offered. In an explicit rejection of the growing demand for a public system of mass education, Wheeler assigned vocational training to the state’s network of junior colleges, thereby freeing the University from responsibility for lower-division curriculum. Cooperation between these two institutions, he argued, helped to foster the democratic impulses that made California unique. A top-quality education, at either level, specific to the needs of the individual, fit the criteria of the egalitarian society that California was in the forefront of creating.

The intent, Douglass writes, “was not to sustain a stagnant class system based on social and economic status. Rather, the goal, which reflected their powerful, if at times romantic, sense that California could be a bold democratic experiment, was to reinvent and create a new, inclusive class structure based more fully on merit” (p. 125). Progressivists, Douglass argues, had successfully established a social and economic contract with the people of California, and the state’s system of public higher education was at the heart of it. Nonetheless, the University’s position in this relationship remained a source of ambiguity as it continued to espouse the virtues of meritocracy while promoting an elite educational institution for the next several decades.

A leadership change in 1930 did little to alleviate this ambiguity. Robert Gordon Sproul, who would preside over the University for nearly thirty years, believed emphatically that higher education should in fact stand apart from the everyday economic and business needs of Californians. While he acknowledged that expansion was vital to the state’s economy, he argued that such expansion be permanently limited to the junior colleges. As University of California historian Verne Stadtman has written, Sproul maintained that there was no room at the University for those “whose talents do not lie along the line of a university career.”[2] Expansion of the University, by contrast, would only create a drain on its resources, leading to a decrease in its stature. The drive to open a second UC campus in the southern portion of the state was already divisive enough, in that, as Sproul reasoned, the University president would be forced to ignore his responsibilities as an educator in order to traverse the state placating competing political interests between its northern and southern sections.[3]

With this strategy, Sproul helped to sustain the progressive vision of higher education in the state by linking meritocracy to expanded facilities, but this further solidified the University’s growing reputation for elitism. “The goal of our great nation,” Sproul emphasized in 1947, “should not be a university education for all but rather equal opportunity for all to get a good education of the kind for which they are qualified by natural endowments and industrious application.”[4]

Stadtman argues that these views of Sproul’s “were not shaped by esoteric educationalism,” but actually reflected public opinion. Rooted in a progressive Republicanism and Presbyterian morality that enabled him to generalize his vision for “the nonpartisan, nondenominational University,” Stadtman writes, “his ideas meshed so completely with the central themes of the American creed that people in all walks of life accepted them readily” (p. 258). Growing enrollment demands, however, were leading many to question these values. Here, Douglass makes an important distinction, disagreeing with Stadtman. Despite the expansion of the junior colleges, Douglass shows, higher education in California remained a privilege. The state’s normal schools, traditionally teacher’s colleges, began to exert a more powerful influence upon higher education in the state at this time. With growing enrollment and influence in the state legislature, the state colleges were now developing a vision that competed directly with the University’s.

The transformation of the teachers’ colleges, first expanded during the Progressive era, occurred when local communities responded to an increased need for an educated workforce. Growing metropolitan areas began to
outgrow the limitations of their local junior colleges, and the university remained out of reach for many who otherwise were in need of increased training. To alleviate this growing need, many junior colleges developed plans to transform themselves into four-year state programs. In other areas, new colleges were established where none before had existed.

Sproul was appalled by these developments, and he was especially concerned with the growing tendency of existing state college administrations and faculties "to establish academic programs that had little to do with teacher training (p. 139)." The rise of state college autonomy was now a direct threat to the University's dominance, and this issue became more prominent after the Second World War because state colleges now exceeded the University in enrollment (p. 193). This was to send Sproul into a defensive posture that he would hold for the better part of two decades.

Meanwhile, Sproul's "two-legged University" was experiencing a population boom of its own. Enrollment at Berkeley jumped from approximately 17,000 students before the war to almost 26,000 by 1949 (UCLA increased from about 10,000 to 17,000 in the same period). This jump, of course, was due largely to the absorption of tens of thousands of war veterans, many of whom were taking advantage of the provisions of the GI Bill. The wave of veterans certainly strained the already limited resources of the University system, but it was a second wave that was projected to arrive in the late 1950's that was of real concern. More importantly, population studies anticipated that the education boom would be sustained beyond its point of immediate impact, creating a need for even more colleges in the future.[5]

Alarmed by such figures, Governor Earl Warren argued that California's top priority was to develop plans for its transition to a postwar economy. Looking forward, Warren pushed through legislation expanding the state's socioeconomic infrastructure, and he renewed the call for an expansion of higher education. Recognizing that returning veterans would require specific forms of professional training, the Governor advocated for the inclusion of the state colleges in his program. Sproul now found his vision of the University to be in a heightened state of confrontation with many educators, the State Board of Education (which represented the state colleges), and the Governor's office. More importantly, perhaps, was the growing perception that he was out of touch with popular notions of the shape that democracy itself should take.

In response to these concerns over swelling enrollment and the growing feud between the University and the state colleges, and influenced by the policies of the Warren administration, the University's Board of Regents and the State Board of Education agreed to form a committee that would thoroughly study the state's needs in higher education. The ensuing Strayer Report of 1948 was the first comprehensive effort to coordinate California's disparate systems of public higher education. This report provided a crucial link between the fulfillment of Progressive era efforts to expand opportunity and the postwar visions of the New Frontier.

Studying the National Resources Planning Board's 1943 report, Equal Access to Education, the Strayer team, according to Douglass, "argued that expanding higher education opportunity was critical not only to improve socioeconomic mobility and support economic growth but also as a matter of national defense. A better-educated workforce would help to create the brainpower and technology necessary to confront the spread and threat of communism" (p. 190). Thus, Progressive idealism was now linked directly to the political economy of the Cold War, with higher education at the core of public policy. In addition, financial aid programs were promoted to directly involve more citizens in the collegiate experience and thereby public life, increasing the role of federal assistance in the shaping of postwar democracy.

The Strayer Report made it clear that in order to meet growing enrollment demands, California's system of higher education must expand. To do so, it advocated the building of a statewide network of regional economies, strengthened by local schools that in turn reflected the specific needs of the communities they represented. The construction of small, intimate campuses was recommended, ingeniously connecting the intimacies of college life to the realities of expansion. This appeal was also an attempt to address the concerns of the University of California, according to Stadtman, by "promoting a natural division of lower-division students to the junior colleges and state colleges" (p. 351). This natural division, Stadtman writes, could be accomplished by emphasizing upper-division and graduate study at the University. Even though the report effectively protected the University's stature, it also provided a blueprint for expansion into the 1950s and vastly increased the responsibilities of the state colleges.

With student body populations in the state colleges continuing to grow, state college faculties had also begun to increase their efforts to expand the liberal arts curric-
ula of their institutions. One major step in this curricular expansion was the introduction of engineering programs in 1947. The development of this field in particular provided the state colleges with better ground on which to obtain state and federal funding to develop research facilities. Berkeley and Stanford, of course, were critical institutions in the developing defense-oriented economy of the Cold War, but now the state colleges could legitimately claim to have both much to gain and to offer in a restructured relationship with the University.

The Strayer Report sanctioned this view, recommending that Master's Degree programs, though not doctorates, be developed in specific fields such as engineering in state schools. In essence, the Strayer team was moving to placate local interests in the state legislature and force a truce between the University and the rival state colleges. These solutions were significant for the short term, and, Douglass argues, provided the basis for subsequent planning efforts such as that developed by the Master Plan. They fell short, however, of resolving the University's long-range concerns, leaving open the rising possibility of future confrontation.

The election of Pat Brown as Governor in 1958 proved the first step toward a final point of resolution. A firm believer in "the absolute destiny of California to grow,"[6] Brown set a standard for the shape of the New Frontier to come several years later. In particular, his vision of education's role in the reformation of society at both the state and national levels was vitally important. Elected by over one million votes, Brown, as the self-appointed "education governor," dramatically increased funding for higher education. He also lobbied the state legislature, the State Board of Education, the UC Regents, and state college officials in an effort to coordinate the various missions of the different branches of higher education in the state.

Seeking rational leadership to promote his plan, Brown enlisted new University of California President Clark Kerr to lead a team of representatives of these varied interests in a major overhaul of the provisions developed by the Strayer Report. For years, Kerr had worked as a prominent labor negotiator throughout the western United States, and his skills as a mediator were largely what endeared him to Brown. More to the point, Brown was impressed by Kerr's arguments that the new generation of students would march dutifully from their graduation ceremonies to jobs in the science-based industries of the Cold War economy.[7] Brown recognized that with Kerr he had the opportunity to build the consensus that public higher education in California had lacked as disparate interests vied for prominence. Now, advocating the expansion of the system as a means to directly connect public higher education to the economy, Kerr brought a fresh perspective to the leadership of the University. Distancing himself from Sproul's isolationism, Kerr broke a deadlock that had hindered the reorganization of higher education in the state in the wake of the postwar enrollment surge.

However, like Sproul, Kerr felt emphatically that California's leadership in the national economy was directly attributable to the quality and prominence of the Berkeley campus, and he in no way wished to diminish its stature. As a result, he moved to formalize and limit the role of the state colleges, even while he agreed to create more of them, by fighting vehemently to reestablish research as the sole property of the University. State college representatives on the Master Plan Survey Team subsequently voiced concern that denying them of research facilities would relegate their system to a permanent second-class status. Reflecting decades of conflict now heightened by the research-driven interests of the Cold War, early meetings of the Survey Team, Douglass shows, were thus fraught with intense and bitter debate that jeopardized the attempts at consensus that Kerr had been expected to forge.

The role of pragmatic mediator that Kerr had been hired to fulfill now faced significant challenges. On several occasions, Douglass details, the University of California abandoned attempts at negotiation as a frustrated Kerr threatened to shelve the Master Plan in favor of a hostile takeover of the state colleges. At one critical point in the negotiating process, for example, Kerr met resistance from state college representatives over the issue of the appropriate function of each segment in the system. Lobbying for doctoral degrees by the state colleges had not waned after the attainment of the Master's degree sanctioned by the Strayer Report. Now, a plan presented by state college representatives offered what state college officials thought would be an acceptable compromise. In exchange for obtaining expanded research facilities and the doctoral degree, the state colleges would agree to take on a much higher burden of undergraduate students, thereby allowing the University to redouble its focus upon extended research.

Many in the University were persuaded by this proposal and stood ready to agree to it. Kerr, however, and his primary confidant Dean McHenry, privately expressed alarm at a plan that would effectively pro-
mote the state colleges as a parallel university system, “mark(ing) the beginning of the end of the university’s dominant position in the state’s hierarchy of public higher education.” “The state colleges are to take over nearly everything,” McHenry lamented, forcing the University to “live in the stratosphere” (p. 269). With this, Douglass shows, it was actually McHenry, and not Kerr, who kept negotiations on track. While Kerr plotted the University’s takeover of the state system, McHenry emerged as the pragmatist, warning Kerr that such a move would prove beneficial to the state colleges in the long run as the regents, under political pressure, would invariably favor the equalization of resources throughout the many campuses.

The state college effort to obtain research facilities had been linked all along to a desire for greater autonomy, especially in controlling their own budgets. The expansion of its liberal arts curriculum was deemed central to its role in postwar society, and fiscal flexibility was central to this effort. Seeing things differently from the way McHenry did, state college officials, led by San Francisco State President Glenn S. Dumke, believed that a superboard would favor the UC campuses and limit the ability of the state colleges to control their own resources. Thus, it was the fear of a single board, though for different reasons, that provided the first area of common ground. Ultimately, the state colleges acquiesced, giving up research by accepting a compromise that would bring them a joint doctorate with the University in selected fields.

The omnibus Master Plan for Higher Education in California of 1960 emerged as a masterstroke of legislative policy and a renowned example of how to forge a democratic compromise, even if forced, out of ideas produced by disparate systems fighting to retain their autonomy. The University and the state colleges fell under the jurisdiction of separate boards, and the junior colleges were left under local legislative control. Other states, according to Douglass, reorganized their systems of higher education in this period as well, but all turned to superboards and centralized administrations and planning. California’s tripartite system, however, quickly became a model for a more successful method of reorganization. Several of these states, he notes, quickly abandoned their centralizing efforts and studied California’s successful ability to “create knowledge to serve the needs of society (p. 4).”

This success was accomplished, in large part, by assuring a tuition-free system, reinforcing the underlying Progressive impulses that had shaped public higher education in California since the expansion of opportunity mandated by the land grant movement of the 1860s. Now California had completed a century of work, creating a “symbiotic network of public institutions that balances mass higher education with the concept of meritocracy” (p. 313). Because it had done so while keeping costs to taxpayers at a minimum, the “California Idea” emerged as a paradigm for socioeconomic expansion in the postwar period. The Master Plan for Higher Education in California, Douglass argues, is therefore a document of unique importance, “a pinnacle of modernist ideals of rationality and efficiency, championing democracy and inclusion and, ultimately, promising prosperity and culture (p. 312).”

Nonetheless, the Master Plan remains an imperfect document despite its central place in California’s democratic tradition. In his introduction, Douglass writes that the reader would be making a mistake if she were to “begin this story thinking it chronicles a slow and rational march of policymaking. California’s path toward a vast network of public college and university campuses is intertwined with sharp political battles, power politics, racism, sexism, sometimes slow adaptation to economic change, miscalculations, and poor decisions with unforeseen consequences. The twists and turns are many. As this narrative describes, the development of California’s higher education system is intricately tied to the often turbulent and certainly spectacular history of California (pp. 10-11).”

In portraying these twists and turns, Douglass has established the groundwork for a much needed and comprehensive understanding of the historical development of California’s unique and celebrated system of public higher education. His account of the many-faceted political maneuvering that produced the tripartite system is first rate. However, Douglass dwells almost exclusively upon political battles and power politics in relation to how issues of economic and social class barriers limit access to higher education. Given the intense trajectory of racial, sexual, and gender politics in the shape of admissions and curricular policies in the period since the instigation of the Master Plan, many readers will be disappointed that he chooses to end his narrative in 1960 and that he does not further address issues of racism and sexism before 1960. For Douglass, the Master Plan was the culmination of a century of political maneuvering by Progressives who understood that “the primary barrier to education was economic class (p. 297).” “At present,” by contrast, “there are significant differences in the college-
going rates among racial and ethnic groups that are reflective of a stratified society never imagined by the authors of the Master Plan (p. 321).”

However, as historian Alexander Saxton has suggested, class formation in California and the west was based upon premises of white supremacy that brought together the egalitarian ideology of the Jacksonian period and labor conflicts after the Civil War.[8] By the time of the Progressive revolution of 1910 in California, methods of Chinese, Mexican, Japanese, and Filipino exclusion were embedded in the state’s collective consciousness both institutionally and ideologically. Industrial and trade unions established exclusionary practices, and unskilled labor emerged as the domain of those non-white populations, with African American workers joining them in large numbers by the time of the Second World War.

The Strayer Report, which provided the basis for the Master Plan’s strategy, relied upon New Deal policies for its raw material. In their subsequent effort to shape the Plan in fundamentally democratic terms, the Survey Team turned to a 1946 report commissioned by the Truman administration that insisted that every American should be allowed to “carry his education, formal and informal, as far as his native capacities permit” (p. 191).” This report argued that what inhibited this ability was not only economic hardship, but racial, religious, and geographic barriers as well. Seemingly, then, there was a federal acknowledgment in educational planning that inequities existed besides those of an economic, class, character. Yet the postwar liberals in California who forged educational reform, led by such figures as Pat Brown and Clark Kerr, did not actively challenge racial discrimination when they created the Master Plan for Higher Education.

The decentralization of the governing process was clearly the area where the California Idea departed from the efforts of other states. Yet the more that the tripartite system crystallized as a democratic unit, the more the principles that forced the consensus of the 1958-1960 period were compromised. This contradiction was largely the result of a clash of political interests as the governing boards of the University of California and the state colleges reacted to popular critiques of the Master Plan. The politicization of the UC Regents and the California State College Board of Trustees is generally attributed to the advent of Republican ideologues like Governor Ronald Reagan and State Superintendent of Public Education Max Rafferty. While Reagan’s appointees to the two boards were certainly influential in attacks on such Master Plan policies as a tuition-free system and class-based affirmative action, it can be argued that the governing process established for the Plan by liberal Democrats, while flexible in structure, was too rigid ideologically and too methodical in its vision to withstand the subsequent polarization of the 1960s.

The calls for inclusive programs that emanated from that period were deeply rooted in the populist history of the state. Ironically, they flared at a moment of unprecedented prosperity when it appeared that a century of Progressive reform had reached a point of culmination. The public battles on and off campuses during the 1960s were an important critique of the struggle by liberal educators to chart the best possible course for a fair system of equal opportunity and social stability. The economic expansion of the late 1990s is another period when, paradoxically, the gap between the accessibility of a Berkeley education and tracking toward one’s local junior college is particularly acute, as tuition hikes and the dismantling of affirmative action programs can attest. The extraordinary story of the California Idea, told expertly by John Aubrey Douglass, therefore remains an unfinished one.

Notes


[4]. Quoted in Stadtman, The University of California, 352.

[5]. Stadtman, 350. The statistics that Stadtman cites are figures released by the State Office of Planning and Research, the United States Bureau of the Census, and the United States Office of Education.


[7]. Roger Rapoport, California Dreaming: The Political Odyssey of Pat and Jerry Brown (Berkeley, CA: Nolo Press, 1982), 61.

[8]. Alexander Saxton, The Rise and Fall of the White

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