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Our Universities: Lessons from California and China

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Our Universities: Lessons from California and China

Higher education in China is changing rapidly. When China's higher education complex matures, it may look like the Golden State's in 1960.

“China maintains a highly specialized approach to university studies that has its roots in the Soviet model, but many Chinese educators want to blend in more liberal education to encourage social morals, civic responsibility, innovation and critical thinking.”

Didi Tang, Associated Press, June 14, 2013

The Pacific Ocean is bounded by distinct cultures. The formerly free-wheeling California hanging on by a thread on one side, and the cumbersome, but burgeoning, state-empowered and growing, entrepreneurial giant China on the other. Pressure for change on both shores is equal, but on one shore the pressure for excellence and efficiency is rising, while on the other, it is sinking. The trend is good for China but not so good for California.

The brilliance of Clark Kerr's ***California Master Plan*** for higher education, conceived in the post war vitality of the mid 20th century, gestated and birthed in the early 60s, has never been more apparent than now. However, the DNA of Kerr's baby is being mutated. Last week in ***Inside Higher Ed***, Paul Fain posted: *“Two-Year Colleges in California Mull Bachelor's Degrees”* revealing the ever-increasing number of community colleges coveting bachelor's degrees under the banner of service and efficiency.

Kerr dreaded *“mission creep.”* Quality in higher education required adherence to unique purposes. Limited access research universities, namely the University of California; distributed access baccalaureate and master's institutions, to wit, the Cal State schools; and wide-open admissions community colleges for workforce education and university preparation. This three-tiered layer cake was transformative becoming the world's best conceptual framework for post-secondary study.

California's community colleges now covet bachelor's degrees. Forces at work in society have changed since the 50s. The internet, access for a greater number and wider array of people, and rising costs are morphing universities around the world.

The appetite of community colleges for bachelor's degrees is rationalized as a response to high-demand, application oriented professions such as nursing and automotive technology. Assuming advanced knowledge and insight is optional in these fields is a first order *faux-pas*.

“Nurses are caring women who know how to make a bed,” and “automotive technologists have greasy hands” represent antiquated predispositions. Visit a hospital or an automobile manufacturing and testing facility. These professionals need research and insight as much as the physicists at Lawrence Livermore Laboratory in California, or the physicians at Mayo Clinic: a different kind of research, but research nonetheless.

On the other side of the Pacific, China is developing an approach to higher education that looks more like Kerr’s 1960 model than the looming 2013 California contraction. China sees the opportunity education provides as an economic stimulus. After years of neglect sustained by superficial and perfunctory Soviet sway, discovery and innovation are seen as imperative for the learning experience. Rote anything in higher education does not work.

The universities of Liaoning Province in northeastern China have grown scientific research and development functions from 1.7 billion Yuan in 2005, to 9 billion Yuan in 2011 (\$1.3 billion U.S.) according to a study by Huang Mingyue and Yang Guangmin published at the ***International Conference on Advanced Information and Communication Technology for Education*** this year.

The integration of industry/university research is intended to grow educational opportunity and the economy in Liaoning Province. Interestingly, the point of the ***California Master Plan*** was to change the railroad- based economy to one founded on ideas and insight. The experiment in Liaoning Province universities is an expression of Kerr’s plan, a drive towards an economy of discovery and insight.

Forces at work turn the ***California Master Plan*** muscle into flab. In northeastern China a vision strengthens the notion that universities improve society by valuing research and knowledge generation as essential. Admittedly, Liaoning Province is aimed towards the established industrial base there, but the core principles are too similar to overlook.

Knowledge drives opportunity and economic vitality. Neglect of this free society precept demeans university purpose, and shortchanges citizens who aspire to the benefits of learning. Training, absent knowledge generation and critical thinking narrows focus, while education broadens and enriches it. China is running from the former towards the latter. California is muddled.

Our universities should nurture knowledge and insight generating power. Shed waste, ineffectiveness, mindless looks-like-learning activity and diminished value credentials.

Core values need not change, nor be walked away from.