

Gentrifying the University and Disempowering the Professoriate: Professionalizing Academic Administration for Neoliberal Governance

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Abstract

Public higher education is under threat from state disinvestment, leading to the gentrification of the university through rising tuition rates and increasing reliance on adjunct professors. At the same time, there has been an expansion in the ranks of higher education administrators, who are concerned with improving university rankings and superficial metrics of success at the cost of educational equity and shared governance. The policies and technorational systems of regulation that they champion tend to gentrify the university, making it less accessible to students from underresourced communities. I argue that the growth of academic administrators is not just a drain on university budgets but also works to erode the role of faculty, staff, and students in decision-making. The gentrification of the university depends on the technocratic erosion of shared governance in the name of efficiency and productivity.

More people in the United States have college degrees than ever before. However, changes to public higher education funding and administration are making it less accessible to economically disadvantaged students while eroding the working conditions and power of faculty. Public investment in higher education has been declining for over a decade, severely limiting access and increasing debt loads, which especially hurts students from economically disadvantaged households. These changes have been accompanied by a growth in

the number of academic administrators who apply technical systems for rationalizing admissions, course offerings, and scheduling; program assessment; and student advising, taking important decision-making power out of the hands of faculty. Because the performance of the university—academic and economic—is now carefully assessed, measured, analyzed for growth, and ranked following a market logic, these professional academic administrators justify their cost by instituting changes that can be measured and claimed as positive progress and growth. Policies that push students to graduate more quickly, that increase the appearance of competitiveness of the institution, or that limit the costs of academic units and programs make these administrators look good on paper and make the university more appealing to foundations and donors. However, these same policies may have negative impacts on students and the communities they come from, as well as on working conditions for faculty and staff.

Academic administrators claim that these costly transformations of university governance are necessary to improve the efficiency of higher education. Often their intended effect is to improve an institution's national and international rankings, which are increasingly important to attracting students. As the growth in the number of college students slows and public funding for education declines, colleges and universities are competing more intensely for students. At the same time, students and parents concerned about the rising costs of education want proof that a college or university will graduate students on time and help them get jobs. Institutions are ranked and compared based on graduation rates, tuition costs, selectivity, and average earnings of graduates. An expansive class of mobile academic administrators with little or no experience in the classroom increasingly make crucial decisions about education based on the need to produce favorable statistics about the institution rather than on what the impact will be on students and faculty. Competition for funding, students, and favorable press drive administrators to make important governance decisions that used to be made through shared governance with a professional faculty with other concerns, including student welfare.

University administration has expanded quickly since 2000, while full-time and tenure-track faculty hiring declined. According to the Delta Cost Project at American Institutes for Research (2014), "As the ranks of managerial and professional administrative workers grew, the number of faculty and staff per administrator continued to decline. The average number of faculty and staff per administrator declined by roughly 40 percent in most types of four-year colleges and universities between 1990 and 2012, and now averages 2.5 or fewer faculty and staff per administrator." Faculty salaries stagnated during this period, while administrative salaries grew. The impact of this growth in academic administration goes far beyond its cost, as it remakes the way decisions are reached about admissions, curriculum, hiring, and finances, shifting the balance of power

between professors and administrators and leading to implementation of policies that often hurt students from poorly resourced schools and communities.

Combined with the rise in student debt loads, the expansion of academic administration is gentrifying the university and deprofessionalizing the professoriate. Because academic administrators are evaluated on the degree to which they improve widely used metrics such as graduation rates, average GPA, and selectivity of admissions, they are more concerned with producing favorable data than serving the needs of students and local communities. Faculty may seek to advocate for students, but much of educational policy is now decided by administrators, computer algorithms, and paid consultants, limiting the power of faculty and shared governance. These patterns become clearer when we look at particular institutions. Drawing on experiences and data from the campus where I have worked for eighteen years—California State University, Los Angeles—I argue that the growth in administrators led to policies that push economically disadvantaged first-generation students out of college while making it appear that colleges are doing a better job at educating their students. As more decision-making fell to administrators, including the decision to staff courses with adjuncts rather than tenure-line faculty, faculty participation in shared governance became limited to certain very circumscribed realms and faculty power declined.

Gentrification of the California State University System

The twenty-three campuses of the California State University constitute the largest public higher education system in the United States. In 1960, the California Master Plan for Higher Education established rules for coordinating access to higher education with the goal of ensuring access to a growing student population. It established three tiers: the University of California system, the California State University campuses, and community colleges. The California State University campuses do not, for the most part, offer PhD programs like the UC campuses, and our campuses are supposed to accept the top one-third of graduating high school seniors, compared to the more selective UC campuses. Most students in the CSU system today are students of color, over 40 percent qualify for a Pell Grant, and one-third are the first in their families to go to college. The average parental income of first-year students at UC campuses is \$80,000/year; the average parental income of first-year students at CSU campuses is half that (Santa Barbara City College 2008). Admissions to the UC campus have become increasingly competitive as state support for higher education in California and across the nation has declined. The average GPA of admitted students at most UC campuses is higher than 4.0. Pressure has mounted on Cal State campuses to raise their admissions requirements, too, a process the system calls “impaction.” California residents are finding it increasingly difficult to get into a four-year public university, marking a retreat from the goals of the California Master Plan to assure educational access.

Both the UC and CSU systems are being reshaped by some of the wider political conditions affecting higher education across the country—public disinvestment in education and skyrocketing tuition costs, leading to the growing dependence of colleges and university on philanthropic and foundation funding and the willingness of students to accrue debt. With the bleeding of corporate logics into higher education, college administrators have come to perceive students as valuable commodities, and they compete to attract them through rebranding and the institution of administrative and policy changes meant to improve a college or university's position in national and international rankings. Potential students use these national rankings to compare schools and foundations draw on them in assessing where to invest their money. Campuses advertise their rankings and most can lay claim to one or more that sound good: best national universities, best regional universities, best public or research universities, number one in educating teachers in the state, number one in sending minority graduates to PhD programs, and so on. One way to improve campus rankings is by pushing your applicant pool toward more high-performing students, who are more likely to come from well-resourced high schools and households and have the resources to study full-time and work fewer hours, likely increasing the average student GPA, decreasing time to graduation, and lessening the need to provide remedial courses or extra support for struggling students. This is the gentrification of higher education—restricting access to lower-performing students to enhance metrics and ratings, making universities look as if they are improving their performance and justifying the proliferation of academic administrators.

At Cal State LA, these patterns played out in ways that illustrate how neoliberal reforms in higher education may lead a university to achieve improved metrics even as it fails to serve the educational needs of local communities and economies. Cal State LA is a Hispanic-serving institution with the highest rate of Pell Grant recipients of all the twenty-three Cal State campuses. Over 90 percent of students are students of color and about one-third are first-generation college students. Many come from immigrant families, and the campus has the highest rate of undocumented students in the CSU system. As might be expected, our students struggle with many barriers to their success, including poverty, houselessness, hunger, state violence, and the need to support their families. They may experience crises that result in failed classes, low GPAs, or extended leaves. The 1976 state education code allowed students who were disqualified for enrollment due to poor performance to apply for reinstatement. While the formal rules around reinstatement have not changed since then, it used to be easier for such students to get reinstated. But as demand for higher education has grown, many campuses have made it more difficult for such students to return. When these students drop out, no one tracks them—they simply disappear, to be replaced by a student more able to complete their degree quickly, and the university looks like it has improved graduation rates and average GPAs by shedding

students with low GPAs who take longer to graduate. Indeed, students who fail to graduate for any reason are not tracked; the metrics only capture successes.

Another clear example of the gentrification of Cal State LA is “impaction,” whereby a campus is permitted to raise minimum admission standards for GPA and SAT or ACT test scores above the approved systemwide criteria. The Cal State LA campus leadership applied for permission to impose impaction in the 2018–19 academic year. The GPA requirements for admission of first-year undergraduate students rose from 2.0 to 2.75. The plan was imposed despite widespread opposition by students, faculty, community groups, and local community colleges and school districts. The increase in GPA requirements for admission favors students from more resourced high schools that can afford to offer more advanced placement classes, student support, and college counseling, and it favors students with higher household income who might benefit from private tutoring or courses helping them prepare for academic testing. While it is too early to know how this policy change will affect admissions at Cal State LA, we know that when sister campuses in the CSU system implemented impaction, the percent of Black, Latinx, and American Indian students enrolled declined steadily. The Campaign for College Opportunity (2015) found that the average SAT score of incoming freshmen at impacted CSUs grew 40 to 72 points, compared to only 2 points at non-impacted campuses. As campuses throughout the system moved to declare impaction, the number of CSU-eligible students who were not accepted at any campus rose and has been over 30,000 students per year since 2014.

The Cal State system provides for slightly lower admission standards for students who live in the geographic region of each campus, called the “local service area.” California residents from outside the local service area must meet a higher bar to gain acceptance. Students who are not admitted to their local campus because of rising admissions criteria related to impaction may be accepted at other CSU campuses. However, they have to be able to pay the costs of room and board that they would be spared had they been admitted to their local campus, again disadvantaging the poorest students. These changing admission policies make it hard for students to understand admissions and for parents and counselors to advise them. Anecdotally, the handful of high school and community college counselors that I know in Los Angeles had not been notified about impaction at Cal State LA and had not been able to help their students understand the implications before applying.

A campus coalition of faculty, students, and staff mobilized against the plan for impaction at Cal State LA, as did local community groups, community college faculty, and high school counselors and administrators. According to state law, the campus was required to consult with faculty, students, and community groups, which it did through a series of town hall meetings. Many spoke out at town hall meetings and meetings of the board of trustees and chancellor. The faculty senate of the main feeder

community college issued a statement condemning impaction. The campus set up a webpage for public feedback, most of which seemed to oppose impaction. However, consultation is not the same as approval. The campus administration and the chancellor pushed for the policy despite opposition. Nor was the policy voted on by the campus academic senate or by the system board of trustees. The approval for impaction came from then-chancellor Timothy White, who retired soon after. The administrators who pushed for this policy, such as the provost and vice-provost for enrollment services, were promptly rewarded with more prestigious positions on another campus, their reputations burnished by their having imposed a draconian policy at Cal State LA despite organized opposition.

Because California is a majority Latinx state, campuses that declare impaction can still stake a claim to having a diverse student body. However, the superficial diversity hides the ways that policies like impaction make it harder for working class, undocumented, and first-generation students to get into and graduate from a public four-year college. When a campus improves its average GPA or graduation rate, it can claim to be more efficient, and it appears to be serving more students. But when we measure colleges by their successes and ignore their failures—the students they fail to serve and the communities they abandon—we overlook how measuring educational outcomes in terms of output and market share prevents us from adequately considering educational equity.

No one tracks students who are not admitted due to higher admission standards or students who drop out; students who do not make the university look good simply disappear from their accounting. The gentrification of Cal State LA—barring or pushing out lower-performing students and courting those who seem more academically successful—occurred amid a blossoming of well-paying administrative positions that help manage the university from above. At Cal State LA, the median salary for an administrative position is just under \$200,000, while the average salary of a full professor is just over \$100,000. From 2013 to 2018, the number of managerial administrative positions rose from fifty-five to seventy. During that same period, the number of tenured faculty declined by 8 percent. In the past, many administrative positions were staffed by career educators who understood their local campus and served as deans or provosts. Today, many are career administrators who move from one administrative post and campus to another with frequency. In 2014, a report from the New England Center for Investigative Reporting noted, “The number of non-academic administrative and professional employees at U.S. colleges and universities has more than doubled in the last 25 years, vastly outpacing the growth in the number of students or faculty, according to an analysis of federal figures. The disproportionate increase in the number of university staffers who neither teach nor conduct research has continued unabated in more recent years” (Marcus 2014). In addition, most academic

administrators lack the job security of tenured professors and may be constrained in their ability to criticize the systems in which they work.

While state law requires consultation with faculty and community groups before making major changes to admissions criteria, the consultation over impaction at Cal State LA was in name only. In the end, administrators were able to force the campus to implement impaction without any meaningful democratic process. Faculty and students who organized around the issue were demoralized after losing, and the process highlighted our lack of power and input in decision-making in the university. Increasingly, shared governance on our campus has been restricted to very delimited domains, such as generating and approving curriculum. However, the major decisions that affect our work, the students, and the educational access of local communities are increasingly in the hands of academic administrators.

The (il)logic guiding policies aimed at restricting access to higher education relies on two assumptions: that higher education is a limited good and that higher-achieving students deserve it more than lower-achieving students. Both are false. California, like most states, has disinvested in higher education, devoting a smaller and smaller percentage of the state budget to higher education for four decades in a row. Per-student funding for the California State University system has fallen 25 percent since 1977 (Public Policy Institute of California 2017). One of the ways public universities make up the shortfall is by raising tuition, contributing to growing levels of student debt. The second pillar of the gentrification of higher education is the idea that higher-achieving students deserve the increasingly restricted seats in the classroom more than other students, that they are “readier” for it. But admission criteria clearly favor students from better-resourced schools that can offer many advanced placement and honors classes, preparation for standardized testing, and strong college counseling. Students from lower-performing schools may just as easily possess the qualities that will contribute to their success in college, but they are seen as less worthy, as if they had not earned it. Like many professors at Cal State, I know students who succeeded at Cal State and went on to PhD programs who would no longer qualify for admission or readmission on our campus. Some of our current academic administrators might not have qualified.

For the 2020–21 academic year, seven of the twenty-three CSU campuses will be impacted, while some majors at other campuses are impacted, but not the entire campus. The pressure is on for more CSU campuses to declare impaction in order to improve their metrics and ratings, and it is likely that more students from underresourced communities will find it difficult or impossible to attend a public, four-year institution in the state. Most campuses are predicting a decline in enrollments for 2020–21 due to the COVID-19 crisis. College enrollment has been declining nationally for several years but would have to drop precipitously for per-student spending in California to catch up with its level forty-five years ago. In contrast

with the goal of the California Master Plan to widen and protect access to higher education, the state has consistently limited access through defunding and by approving restrictive admissions policies that favor students from higher-income households and high schools.

Alternatives

The drive to measure academic outcomes in corporate metrics like output (number of students graduating), efficiency (how quickly they graduate), and competitiveness (selectivity of admissions) is harmful to students who are pushed out because they cannot meet the minimum desired outcomes. These students are just as important as the ones who have been given the resources to succeed. When students and professors have input into academic policy and governance, these might be more favorable to the students we see struggling in our classrooms—the ones who cannot afford bus fare, who come to class sleepy from working all night, who ask to hand their paper in late because their parent got deported, or who have to take the day off to take care of children or siblings. Shared governance is threatened by the burgeoning academic bureaucracy, led by a floating class of academic administrators. As they rationalize academic administration and performance, they require an increasing investment in new automated systems, procedures, and quantitative assessment to produce the predictably ever-improving metrics they seek. These systems, along with the administrative salaries, only add to the drain of public disinvestment in higher education.

Despite the trends I describe above, this moment in higher education presents certain possibilities for change that can empower students and faculty. The growing unionization of college and university campuses and the increasing diversity of faculty, staff, and students can lead to more equity on and off campus and help create a movement for equity and investment in higher education and for student and faculty participation in the major decisions affecting their campuses. The budget crisis will force states and universities to make tough decisions about their spending priorities, and it will be important for faculty, students, and staff to be a part of the decision-making. But this will not happen without a fight and without organizing. It requires that faculty and students demand transparency and full participation in the decision-making processes on their campuses and state funding to expand access to higher education, not shrink it.

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