

Crisis Writing on the California State University

Extended Review Article

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THE DIAGNOSIS OF A CRISIS in United States higher education, though certainly predating the twenty-first century (Dorn 2017), has become particularly pronounced in the wake of the 2007–2008 financial crisis. Indeed, as Bowser suggests in the opening pages of *The Abandoned Mission in Public Higher Education: The Case of the California State University* (2017), the Great Recession birthed a veritable cottage industry of “crisis writers.” The book of the genre, as its author tells us (Blumenstyk 2020), is Goldie Blumenstyk’s *American Higher Education in Crisis? What Everyone Needs to Know* (2014). Billing her work as a “primer” aimed at a wide audience—the title itself tells us *everyone* must know—Blumenstyk identifies and examines the main trends she says have led U.S. higher education to its current state of rot. Prominent among the trends she examines are (1) an increasingly diverse body of students that is accompanied by new, unique sets of needs to which an ill-prepared, if not inflexible, faculty is unable to respond; (2) soaring tuitions, stemming from a combination of state disinvestment and outdated, unsustainable business models, that burden students with unsustainable levels of debt and, when considered in aggregate, might well form the next financial bubble; and (3) racial and economic stratification that continues to grow within and between campuses across the country.

Little of Blumenstyk’s analysis should surprise professional educators. Her tome comprises a synthesis of the higher-ed crisis writing, echoing or restating arguments put forth by others. Despite its punctuation, *American Higher Education in Crisis?* is not offered as an open question. Its central assertions are not only familiar, but also widely acknowledged as accurate, right. Yet, as Bowser asserts, the familiarity, the seemingly self-evident truthfulness, of claims made by Blumenstyk and so many other crisis writers rests on a series of mutually reinforcing problems. Foremost is the problem of anonymity: Exceedingly rare, he points out, is the crisis writer who names a state system of higher education and explains how it illustrates the trends and forces they describe. Instead, broad generalizations take the place of sustained evidence-based argumentation. Were crisis writers to name actual higher-education systems, their claims could be tested, counterexamples—instances of effective higher

education—might be identified, their comparative success studied, and the findings used to improve laggards. The problem of anonymity, Bowser observes, leads to a situation in which “[t]he ‘crisis’ everywhere but at the same time it is nowhere—like hysteria” (2017, 5).

Bowser is not a crisis denier. But he is a skeptic, first, because the higher-ed crisis genre is founded on sweeping generalizations; and second, these generalized crisis scenarios invariably are accompanied by proposed solutions. Take, for instance, assertions that an increasingly diverse student body arrives with special needs to which an entrenched, inflexible army of administrators, faculty, and staff is unable to attend. Setting aside a series of important unknowns (*which* campus? diverse in *what* terms? accompanied by *what* special needs?), such claims form a baseline justification to foster a managerial culture (Law 1997; Cronin 2001). Claims tying incoming student cohorts to exceptional neediness contributes to pressures for increased—transparent, measurable, standardized—evaluation of what actually happens in classrooms. As such, proposed reforms serve to bolster managerialism in administration while further undermining collegial campus cultures and vestiges of professoriate autonomy, setting the two groups at further odds (Rhoades and Slaughter 1997; Oliver and Hyun 2011), affecting a power shift that both draws on and cultivates the sort of anti-intellectualism that has long accompanied the U.S. business ethos.

A business ethos also infuses much of the crisis writers’ fiscal reform advocacy, which most often boils down to encouraging traditional colleges to trim budgets by emulating for-profit universities. The new managerial class follows suit, for instance, mandating more online curricula, increasing class sizes, and implementing hiring practices that over time grow the population of contingent faculty who, as retired tenured lines go unreplaced, are responsible for ever greater shares of teaching load in U.S. higher education (Jaeger and Eagan 2011). This type of reform advocacy normalizes market-based solutions while continued state disinvestment in higher education, though acknowledged (in what often amounts to a head shrug), is accepted as part of a new natural order. In short, Bowser avers, higher-ed crisis writers have crafted a dominant discourse that explains “the crisis as due to failure from within,” not one that has been created from the outside by politicians and free-market advocates. Accordingly, they proffer reform recommendations “in response to internal failures” (2017, 4), for the most part ignoring larger political-economic forces working to dismantle longstanding understandings of U.S. higher education as a public good, not a private commodity (Williams 2016).

The predominance of internal explanation, Bowser argues, relates to a problem of positionality: The crisis literati are largely unaware of the sheer size and diversity of non-elite public higher education in the United States, he observes, because they work primarily as journalists or policy advocates—not academics—and most are pedigreed by elite universities (which of course are exceptions to the crisis they detail and therefore are not targeted for reform). Despite their outsidership *vis-à-vis* higher education, journalists and their think-tank ilk dominate writing on higher education, shaping public opinion and occupying the ears of state lawmakers. Facing this reality, Bowser offers *The Abandoned Mission in Public Education* as his “attempt to break into the discourse on public education at the state level” (2017, 12) by introducing two methodology-based innovations to the crisis literature. First, this relatively thin (127 pages) volume, the author claims, is unprecedented in its employment of the *case study* of a single state’s higher education system—the California State University (CSU)—as a way to understand the national crisis. Second, Bowser says he is first in assessing the crisis and from the perspective of *instruction* in a specific state’s system of higher education. The classroom, where faculty come face-to-face with students, is the ultimate place of discernment of how the decision making of state legislators impacts actual learning.

Professor emeritus of sociology at California State University-East Bay, where he taught for a quarter century, Bowser is an insider. Unlike journalists and policy advocates who dominate national-level discussions of higher education, he is well positioned to undertake his two innovations. Bowser’s insidership conditions his theory selection and line of argumentation. He asserts that employment of structural analysis allows him to “follow decision-making and the consequences of budget cuts in the same way one follows social networks” (2017, 12.). In “following the money,” Bowser’s approach is fundamentally historical, attributing the causes and correlations of crises in the CSU to budgetary decision-making that preceded them in time. Thus, though agreeing with the broad consensus—yes, a higher-ed crisis exists—Bowser diverges in explanation: “The real crises in public higher education are not periodic recessions, increasing tuition, poor graduation rates, poor teaching, etc. These are symptoms of a more central problem. State leaders are the source of the crisis. Governors and state legislatures responsible for public higher education budgets clearly no longer support public higher education at the cost and scale of past decades” (18).

The goals and central argument of *The Abandoned Mission in Higher Education* are promising. Yet the author falls short of his stated mission. The introduction offers an insightful overview and much-needed critique of the higher-ed crisis literature. And the first two substantive chapters are

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complementary, together providing a macro-level understanding of how state-level political decision making correlates to a shifting political-economy in the rise and fall of the CSU from its founding in 1959 to its post-Great Recession era of high crisis. But, beginning in chapter four, Bowser proves unequipped to break the grip of dominant crisis writing, falling prey to many of the very tendencies he critiques in the opening chapter.

The first substantive chapter is titled “The California Master Plan for Higher Education.” Drawing on textual analysis of each of the state’s master plans for higher education, Bowser documents and examines changes in each iteration, the problems addressed and solutions posed, to follow the “unfolding challenge of public higher education in the state and mark when decision-makers abandoned it” (2017, 20). Before presenting his examination of the documents, however, Bowser explains how state higher-education systems are structured as inherently political organizations with chains of command and geometries of power and accountability structured in ways that are hidden from the public. In California, the governor and his staff make initial budget decisions on public higher education, their proposal reviewed by the State Assembly. A compromise budget then moves on for passage by the full legislature, their decision then passed on to the chancellors of each of the three levels of California’s higher-education system: the CSU, the University of California (UC), and the California Community Colleges (CCC) systems. Chancellors and presidents at individual campuses are selected by boards of trustees, themselves appointed by the governor. Thus, final accountability is never local, to a professoriate or a surrounding community—accountability is upward, to the governor and state legislature, whose decision-making fundamentally shapes how each campus of the CSU, along with the UC and CCC, operates. This upward-looking geometry of power and accountability occludes public understanding of how California’s public higher education system really works and, consequently, empowers forces bent on its dismantling.

The first California master plan for higher education was published in 1959, establishing a coordinated three-tiered system and guaranteeing that a college education was accessible to all who wanted one. Furthermore, it contained funding mandates that made higher education in California essentially tuition-free and incentives to attract excellent faculty at all levels. The 1959 document, however, should not be interpreted through the lens of idealism or socialism: The state decision makers, and their advisors, viewed the system of higher education they committed to fund in full as a *public good* that would pay dividends as a critical driver behind the state’s economic dynamism. Indeed, before the century ended, with its generously funded public higher education

training cadres of skilled workers, innovators, and managers, California built an economy that was not only the biggest in the United States, but also larger than that of most countries in the world. A problem, though, lies in the state’s proneness to boom-and-bust economic cycles. In periods of financial crisis, state lawmakers have been forced to make cuts to public higher education, but, in Bowser’s examination of the master plans, cuts traditionally have been commensurate to cuts in other areas; and, after a financial crisis passed, funding allocations traditionally returned to pre-crisis rates.

Bowser identifies the 2002 master plan as the point when public higher education in California became “an abandoned mission” (2017, 31). The document devoted an unprecedented attention to K–12 education, in particular its failure to prepare students to succeed at a state college or university. It also contained expanded discussions of diversity, including the provision that race and ethnicity can be taken into consideration for admission because “diversity can contribute to the quality of education” at the CSU and UC” (27). Such language would suggest that the crafters behind the 2002 master plan viewed diversity positively, but a palpable anxiety was betrayed by the sheer amount of space devoted to the issue of diversity and the fact that it was couched amid broader exposition on a “student crisis” in higher education arising from the creation of “unqualified” students in K–12 public education. The discussion of a “student crisis” was unprecedented, in its expanse and tone, the upshot being that it “provided a rationale for the governor and legislators, who had lost confidence in public higher education, to cut permanently and deeply public higher education’s budget” (33). When the Great Recession hit, Governor Schwarzenegger slashed funding to public higher education by 29.6 percent—a much higher rate than cuts for other funding allocations—between 2008 and 2011. And unlike previous periods of funding cuts, with no pledge for reinstatement, these cuts were permanent.

In chapter three, Bowser turns examination to budget cuts and their main impacts on classrooms. A shibboleth of the predominant crisis literature maintains that the cost of higher education has grown so much as to be unsustainable. But, as Bowser points out, “costs appear unsustainable only if they are not compared with changes in revenue over time” (2017, 37). From 1967 to 2003, total revenues for California grew twenty-three-fold; in the same period, costs for public higher education in the state grew eleven-fold. Furthermore, expenditures for all three tiers amounted to 16.8 percent of the state’s total budget in 1967, but by 2002 the figure had dropped to 12.7 percent. The fact that costs of public higher education in California in fact were sustainable amounted to little, as the sharp reductions enacted during the 2008–2011 financial crisis were made

permanent. The impacts, as Bowser shows, were immediate and far-ranging, first resulting in tuition hikes. The UC and CSU had already begun charging tuitions, which approximately doubled from 1992/93 to 2007/08, a fifteen-year period; but the time for tuitions to double was greatly reduced, growing in the CSU from \$2,772 in 2007/08 to nearly \$5,000 in 2011/12 (40). Despite tuition hikes, campuses throughout the CSU were forced to cut classes while increasing the size of course enrollments and scaling back major requirements. At the same time, it became common practice not to replace retired tenure lines, hiring in their stead lecturers.

The end goal of the budget cuts, Bowser contends, is privatization. Those responsible for or supportive of decreased public funding for higher education, advocating for “the innovative university” (Christensen and Eyring 2011) or “the new American university” (Crow and Dabars 2015), point out that colleges and universities have access to multiple undertapped funding streams, including endowments, federal grants and loans, alumni contributions, patents and licensing fees, and, yes, even more tuition. Bowser contends that such calculus is misguided—if not outright disingenuous—because the CSU’s fundamental mission is teaching, not research, which at the UC campuses indeed attracts significant revenue streams to fill the gap (still, only partly) created by the abandonment of public higher education in California. For teaching institutions, the upshot is more tuition hikes, increased class sizes, additional online courses, and contingent faculty forming greater shares of teaching cadres, all working to impoverish the quality of education at those institutions.

Chapters two and three of *The Abandoned Mission in Higher Education* (2017) work together to document the broad contours of a shifting political-economic regime that correspond to the CSU’s rise and demise. The system, though showing some strains from rapid growth and sheer ambition, had proven remarkably resilient until the financial crisis of 2008–2011, when California’s chief executive capitalized on doubts, anxieties, and retreating commitments that were codified in the 2002 master plan by cutting—permanently—state funding of the system by nearly thirty percent. Saving the CSU from all-out fiscal collapse has been year-on-year growth in enrollment counts, rising from just over 426,000 total students in 2011 to more than 480,000 in 2011, each paying an average annual CSU tuition that in 2007/08 stood around \$2,800, in 2011/12 jumped to nearly \$5,000, and for the current academic year is \$6,660 (CSU 2020).

Accompanying this lunge toward privatization, visible to anybody working in the CSU, is a dramatic demographic shift in which rapidly growing numbers of black and brown—in particular Hispanic/Latinx—students have come to form majority-minority populations on campuses throughout the system. Chapter four, titled “Educating Other People’s Children,” confirms a suspicion I had been harboring in recent years: The drive to privatize the CSU stands as an example of structural racism at work. Bowser’s analysis, expanded to take into consideration how dynamics that occur in K–12 education systems interacts with higher education, suggests that the structural racism in California public education is far more deeply seated and systematic than I had imagined: “*Budget cuts by decision-makers have occurred at each point in the movement of majority-minority students through California primary and secondary schools. It is no coincidence state higher education cuts began just as this population approached college age*” (2017, 56, original italics). The correlation between race/ethnicity and privatization, with budget cuts following the wave of majority-minority students from the time they entered kindergarten until they entered the CSU, is shocking when numbers are laid out bare in table form.

Yet the evidence Bowser marshals to implicate concrete instances of political decision is disappointing. He centers an argument on analysis of Proposition 209—the California Civil Rights Initiative—which, approved by California voters in 1996, amended the state constitution “to prohibit the state from considering race, sex, or ethnicity for employment, public contracts, and public education” (2017, 52). The impact for public higher education was an end to considering race/ethnicity for admission to any tier of public higher education, a practice that had nurtured suspicions among some CSU faculty—including Glynn Custred, who was not only the author’s anthropology colleague at CSU-East Bay, but also co-authored the proposition—that higher numbers of black and brown students in their classrooms were there at the expense of better qualified white students. Bowser may well be correct that “Proposition 209 was not about protecting anyone’s civil rights, nor was it about ensuring that students of color who were admitted to public higher education were qualified. Its covert attempt was to keep public higher education in California predominantly white. Its goal was to protect the system from an alleged tsunami of unqualified students, synonymous with Black and Latinos” (53). But the charge of white supremacy is poorly levied. First, although initiated by a team that included an CSU faculty member who might have been motivated by the notion that students of color were unfairly admitted over whites, Proposition 209 was not directed solely at higher education; it applied to a very broad swath of state agencies offices, as well as individuals and organizations contracting with the state.

Second, if the intent of Proposition 209 indeed were to maintain white supremacy in the CSU, it failed miserably on this account. Since voters approved the constitutional amendment in 1996, the growth in students of color, accounting for increasing portions of its annual enrollments, is among the most notable dynamics of the CSU. Yet, in what seems a sudden shift in his argument, Bowser interprets the very failure of Proposition 209 to produce “its desired outcomes” as the point at which “the ‘nuclear option’ was the only one left,” leaving no choice but to “begin moving the state’s higher public education system toward privatization by deep and permanent budget cuts” (2017, 53–54). This assertion is rife with problems. First is the observation that Proposition 209 *did* in fact lead to lower proportions of African-American and Latinx students in the UC system. Is the reader to believe that grievances arising from demographic shifts in the CSU motivated deployment of a “nuclear option” that would be applied equally to the UC—believe that privatization was the final option in a fight to maintain white supremacy in one system, but in doing so, undermine white supremacy in another?

The problem of logical coherence is coupled with a problem of theoretical rigor. Bowser’s interpretation of Proposition 209’s ostensible failures in meeting its “desired outcomes” is suggestive, even at level of its wording, of causality that is attributable to an agentic actor (or set of agentic actors), motivated by passions and endowed with the free will to choose privatization as a solution in service of an ideal, however perverted or ugly that ideal—in this case, white supremacy—might be. None of this coheres well with structural analysis. Bowser stood on *terra firma* when, after invoking structural analysis as the theoretical framework guiding explanation in *The Abandoned Mission in Higher Education* (2017), he introduced his argument that the current crisis in education results externally from the decision making of state policymakers—as per structural analysis, their decision making is shaped by and serves the emergence of a broader political-economy. Privatization, as it generally appears in research grounded in structural analysis, is associated with neoliberalism, a political-economic ideology that emerged in Western capitalist countries in the 1970s, was empowered as it spread throughout the world after the collapse in Eastern Europe of its ideological foe, communism, in the 1990s, and has become a further entrenched, if not hegemonic, worldwide force in the twenty-first century (Harvey 2007). Bowser’s treatment betrays nary a hint of structural theory’s basic signposts. Even so, in chapters two and three, his explanation of how the decision making of state-level policy makers correlated to the CSU’s shifting fortunes from its founding in 1959 until its *de facto* privatization during the Great Recession, generally cohered to what might be expected of structural analysis.

Thus, my reading of chapter four began with excitement at the prospect of encountering an insider’s explanation of how structural racism is implicated in the crisis inflicted on the CSU by a neoliberal ideology. Bowers opens this chapter strongly by identifying correlations over time with unprecedented budget cuts that followed California’s majority-minority student cohorts through all levels of schooling, beginning K–12 in the 1990s, and continuing as they arrived at California’s public colleges and universities during the financial crisis of 2008–2011. But the twin problems of logical incoherence and theoretical rigor become more apparent when, in a bid to lay blame for the CSU’s crisis at the feet of the Republican Party, Bowser crafts a narrative that frames Proposition 209 as belonging to a line of political conservatism’s history of white supremacy that fuels an unwillingness to support public higher education. Such severe indictment, one would hope, would be carefully crafted, claims nuanced, rigorously supported with clear, cogent evidence. However, devoting little more than a page to a section under the subheading “The Other Children,” i.e., how Republicans view non-whites as “other” and therefore oppose supporting their public education, Bowser replicates the very problem of sweeping generalization he critiqued in the dominant higher-ed crisis writing.

The narrative he weaves begins with the observation that “[m]any conservatives” (2017, 55) opposed civil rights reforms, including school desegregation. Amid the “culture war” of the 1960s, Bowser offers, conservative support for public higher education was undermined by a mix of small-government ideology and the association “some conservatives” made between college campuses and radical politics they viewed as anti-American. How this relates to white supremacy one is left to guess, as no mention of race is made in this slapdash handling of an especially contentious period of U.S. history. He covers the 1980s in a single sentence, observing that some Californian conservatives opposed governmental efforts to desegregate public primary and secondary schools, thereafter committing themselves to the goal of ending racial discrimination wherever it appears that white people are being disadvantaged, including public schools, thereby establishing the link (of sorts) to Proposition to 209.

Hints of political partisanship appear in previous chapters, tying the budgetary cuts to California public higher education to Republican governors Peter Wilson (1991–1999) and, most decisively, Schwarzenegger (2003–2011). Yet structuralist theory generally cautions against an undue focus on individuals or parties, instead examining how ideological and material forces influence large swaths of society—cutting across party affiliation, as well as class- and race-based cleavages—to normalize over time large-scale shifts in political-economic regimes. Sure, decisions of

individual policymakers warrant examination. But, even here, Bowser is highly selective. While the first master plan for public higher education in California was issued in 1959 under a newly elected Democratic governor, in the years leading up to it—when research and planning for the document was undertaken—the governorship and state-level politics were dominated by Republicans. Thereafter, the only other time of Republican dominance of state-level politics coincided with the governorship of Ronald Regan (1967–1974), a period of sustained popular support for the public higher education in California. And while the most dramatic attacks on public higher education in California coincided with the Republican leadership of Wilson and Schwarzenegger, Democrats still dominated state-level politics in Sacramento. On theoretical grounds, Bowser’s partisanship does not align with the structuralist framework he claims to employ. And it does not stand up to basic scrutiny on empirical grounds.

I remain convinced that racism is imbricated in forces pushing the CSU toward privatization, but not because of argumentation found in *The Abandoned Mission in Higher Education*. Bowser would have done well to read Laura Pulido’s “Rethinking environmental racism” (2000). Looking at the case study of Los Angeles, she shows how non-white populations, due to structural forces, historically have been forced to bear the burden of pollution, bad air, poisoned water, and other environmental degradations brought about by proximity to toxic facilities. This is not a result of individuals or political parties, but rather it is tied to widespread acceptance in society of a certain political-economy, *our*—yes, we are all implicated, Pulido argues, and I would agree—acceptance as somehow natural the reign of *laissez-faire* market principles that ultimately work to further marginalize black and brown people. In developing this argument, she urges her reader to reconceptualize racism as a structural phenomenon—something in which we are all, regardless of party affiliation, participants—rather than in terms of personal agency. While structural understandings of racism are widely invoked in contemporary scholarship and public politics, I await analysis in this vein of the crisis in the CSU and, more broadly, of U.S. public higher education.

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