

Before the fall

California's financial crisis jeopardises one of the world's finest universities.



Seed corn in peril at Berkeley – Eyevine

The best public higher education in the world is to be found at the University of California (UC). This claim is backed up by Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China, which provides an authoritative ranking of research universities. The UC's campus at Berkeley ranks third behind two private universities, Harvard and Stanford. Several of the other ten UC sites, such as Los Angeles and San Diego, are not far behind. Californians are justifiably proud.

It is therefore no small matter that this glory may be about to end. "We are in irreversible decline," says Sandra Faber, a professor of astrophysics at UC Santa Cruz who has inadvertently become a mouthpiece for a fed-up faculty. University excellence, she says, "took decades to build. It takes a year to destroy it."

California has been suffering serial budget crises, the latest of which was resolved last month in a rather desperate deal between the governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the legislature. It contained huge cuts, including \$2 billion lopped from higher education. The UC alone has lost a cumulative \$813m of state funding in the last fiscal year and the current one, a cut of 20%. The second-tier California State University (Cal State), with 23 campuses the largest in the country, and the third-tier community colleges have also been clobbered.

The cuts threaten the legacy of two visionaries, Edmund "Pat" Brown, governor from 1959 to 1967, and Clark Kerr, who was in charge of the UC during those years. Kerr envisioned the state's public universities as "bait to be dangled in front of industry, with drawing power greater than low taxes or cheap labour." In a 1960 master-plan he created the three-tiered system.

His ambition was simple. First, to educate as many young Californians as affordably as possible. The best students would go to the UC, the next lot to Cal State and the rest to community colleges with the possibility of trading up. Second, to attract academic superstars. Kerr went about this like a talent scout, and his successors have continued the practice. The UC campuses have collectively produced more Nobel laureates than any other university.

But the master-plan has been under strain for years. State spending per student in the UC system, adjusted for inflation, has fallen by 40% since 1990, says Mark Yudof, the current UC president. The Public Policy Institute of California, a non-partisan think-tank, projects that

California's economy will face a shortfall of 1m college graduates by 2025, depressing the prosperity of the entire state. Public universities, which award 75% of all the state's bachelor degrees, will be largely responsible.

Academic excellence is likely to be the first victim. Both the UC and Cal State are planning to send professors and staff on leave, cram more students into classrooms and offer fewer courses. Attracting and keeping academic stars, and the research dollars that usually follow them, will become much harder.

It is already happening, says Ms Faber. She recently hired three world-class assistant professors whose salaries are now at risk. Other universities have begun to get in touch with them, she says, and they will probably leave. Their best students may go with them. "We are eating our seed corn," the professor laments.

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