

Clark Kerr's Forgotten Legacy

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Welcome. We expect to have an exciting day before us. The term “teach-in” had its origins in the 1960s when students and faculty sought to understand and therefore become active participants in the debate over the war in Vietnam. The same is true today: by assembling both experts and activists, inside policy-makers and outside critics, we will best prepare ourselves for the task that confronts us: nothing less than the defense of a great university in a time of acute dangers.

Our event here is both educational and political, designed to provide a progressive, alternative analysis of the budget crisis and a positive road forward for California, the UC system, and education at all levels of our state. The threat comes not from those who have actually denounced public higher education, but from those inside the UC system and the state government who say they have the University's best interests at heart even as they distort and defame all that has made the University great. We hope this teach-in will forge the analytic weapons necessary to fight back.

To understand what we are in danger of losing, it helps to know why and how our university was built. This system is a product of the early post World War II years when the University of California was refounded, refunded, and greatly expanded. Although no single individual can lay claim to reshaping an entire institution of higher education, Clark Kerr comes close.

Kerr was a visionary. He was Berkeley's chancellor in the 1950s and UC President from 1958 to 1967. As the architect of the 1960 Master Plan for higher education in California, Kerr refounded the UC system as the standard to which every other institution of higher learning aspired. Kerr's hallmark was a guarantee "that there would be a place in college for every high school graduate...who chose to attend."

Kerr's dream for a "multiversity," as he called it, was rooted in his career as a labor economist and liberal. He finished his BA at Swarthmore and then came West to Stanford for graduate study. He hated Stanford! To him the school was an institution in which its wealthy trustees distorted the educational mission. So he transferred to Berkeley where he worked with Paul Taylor, the radical advocate for California farm workers. Together, they studied the poverty, hardship, and desperation that John Steinbeck captured in his 1937 novel, the *Grapes of Wrath*. Kerr's Depression-era experiences

left him keenly aware of the inequalities that distorted American democracy but also dedicated to the peaceful resolution of conflict between labor and capital in the U.S. and elsewhere.

By the 1950s, Kerr had become convinced that a vastly expanded system of higher education was the key to a dynamic, harmonious society based on skill and knowledge. In this new economy, mass higher education was the key to this newly prosperous America where a booming California was clearly in the vanguard. In his famous 1963 book, “The Uses of the University,” Kerr argued that the university was “at the hinge of history.”

Kerr's vision is all about you: a university campus designed to educate the great mass of the American people, To accommodate the influx of baby boomers, Kerr oversaw the opening of the San Diego, Irvine, and Santa Cruz campuses and he greatly expanded UC Santa Barbara. And despite the expenditure of an enormous sum of money, a UC education remained affordable. Under Kerr’s tenure, UC students had no tuition and almost no fees.

Four principles underlay Kerr’s University; they should be honored and defended today.

First, he rejected the philanthropic model for higher education, a model which then and now puts the name of so many wealthy men and

women above the doorways of our great schools. UC would not be dependent upon the likes of a Leland Stanford, an Andrew Carnegie, a James Buchannan Duke, a John D. Rockefeller, or an Andrew Mellon. Instead it would be a product of the people of California, dependent upon the tax revenue of the state and accountable to a democratic polity.

Second, UC would be a system both decentralized and a unitary. Under Kerr's leadership, UC Santa Barbara got its first independent chancellor and so too did UCLA, Davis, Santa Cruz and the rest of the campuses. But UC has always been one system, with one standard for faculty, student achievement, and administrative procedures. This is an amazing accomplishment, envied but still not emulated by many state systems, including such good ones as Michigan, Virginia, New York, and Wisconsin.

Third, all Californians would have access to higher education: a three tiered system that enabled first generation college students to live at home and then transfer to a State University or a to UC when and if they chose. Not all faculty liked this idea, especially if you were stuck at a state university without UC's graduate programs, but for students it provided a ladder that they could climb, so that immigrants and the working class, in California more than any other state, might gain the knowledge and skills

they so demanded. But all of this was and is dependent on low fees and plenty of classroom seats. Kerr built and expanded nine campuses of UC in the 1950s and 1960s. Today we have built Merced, just one more, and although enrollment at UC is higher than in Kerr's day, it has not kept up with soaring population of the state.

And finally and perhaps most important, Clark Kerr and his generation of educators understood that the university was an investment, not in individual well being, although that was certainly true, but in the public goods that make a society both prosperous and democratic. Kerr himself too often thought that corporations and agribusiness would use the knowledge and trained graduates generated by the university in an equitable fashion – that was one reason students at Berkeley and Santa Barbara students revolted against his leadership 45 years ago.

But that the university was a public trust, that it must be responsible to a democratic populous, this Kerr firmly believed. It was the kind of vision that could inspire genuine loyalty to UC at the ballot box and in the legislature where both Republicans and Democrats voted tax increases to pay for it. Today, Kerr's idea of a unified, egalitarian, system of higher education requires a renewed defense. It is a vision that this event seeks to recapture and recast for our own time.

