

Materialism, Idealism, and Higher Education in California

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Executive Summary

For the last 50 years, a belief that building a robust and competitive state economy should predominate California's public higher education goals has become increasingly prevalent, and today it is taken as an unchallenged assumption. This White Paper emphatically rejects that assumption, and argues instead that broader cultural and social goals are of equal, if not more important, concern for Californians' well-being.

The first section frames the issue by placing it in the context of the theories of the noted 20th century sociologist, Pitirim Sorokin. Sorokin argued persuasively that the history of human culture is characterized by a struggle for dominance between *materialistic* and *ideal* values, with the preferred condition being a society that harmonizes both. Sorokin also saw the social crises of the 20th century (which have continued in the 21st century) as characteristic of a dying materialistic phase of culture refusing to yield its hegemony and using ever more desperate means to maintain itself.

The second section introduces into discussion the *California Master Plan for Higher Education*, which was first implemented in 1960 and has undergone periodic revision. It is shown how materialistic and economic values have been progressively more emphasized in the *Master Plan* over time, at the cost of attention to humanistic and ideal values. Moreover, this trend is continuing, despite a growing cultural awareness of the heavy social costs associated with an over-emphasis of materialistic values.

The third section proposes to set our state's public higher education goals on a more sound footing by asking the question, "What is the American Dream?" Thomas Jefferson is taken as a bellwether source of traditional American thinking on this topic. From his writings we see clearly expressed the views: that human happiness, which ought to be the overriding goal of education, involves personal virtue; that high-quality education is necessary for both formation of character and successful democracy; and that, to meet these aims, higher education must be liberal – i.e., containing both technical and humanistic material, in proper balance.

The final section concludes by making four specific recommendations for public higher education in California: (1) state officials must decide on and present *explicit goals* for our public higher education system; (2) we must have *humanist input* in the goal-setting process, to balance the exclusively economic focus that currently drives planning and policy; (3) we must *reduce student debt*; and (4) greater attention should be given to *alternative education paradigms* – one specific example being a Great Books program – that may decrease the cost, expand the coverage, and improve the quality of public higher education.

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We are currently hearing a new chorus of cries about how we must reform higher education in California, and the mantras being recited are that this is necessary "to maintain a robust and competitive state economy", "to preserve our status as a world technology leader", and the like. While there is surely nothing wrong with having a strong economy, it is just as certain that this should not be viewed as the only purpose of higher education. We have seen in California over the last 50 years a steady shift in higher education priorities more and more in the direction of business and economic interests. This position paper questions such lopsided priorities, and seeks to draw attention to the need for a more appropriate and balanced view.

1. A Theory of Culture

We take as a starting point the pioneering theories of culture advanced by the 20th century sociologist Pitirim Sorokin. Sorokin's name is comparatively little known today. But the fact that his ideas, as we shall see, depart from prevailing academic paradigms and assumptions, makes it that much more important that we consider them. What makes Sorokin especially valuable is that he did more than speculate. His theories are buttressed by painstaking empirical research. For example, he and his associates identified and catalogued many thousands of historical art works, classifying and measuring each according to objective dimensions of form and content, and analyzing the data to identify cultural trends over time. Literary and philosophical works throughout history were similarly classified, measured, and analyzed by objective methods.

Sorokin's (1957) theories have two features relevant to our present concern: (1) a model of cultural dynamics, and (2) a diagnosis of and prognosis for the condition of modern society.

1.1 Cultural Dynamics

Sorokin saw in human culture two elemental forces or orientations. We can simplify his sometimes inconsistent terminology by calling these two principles *materialism* and *idealism*.

Ultimately, these two cultural principles derive from a fundamental two-fold nature of man. A recognition of this dualism is a central feature of the Judeo-Christian-Greco-Roman tradition in the West. On the one hand, man is material. He has a body located in time and space. He has sensations, feelings, emotions, instincts and appetites.

On the other hand man has a nature that is eternal, spiritual, or, as it might be called in the Platonic tradition, Ideal. He has an immortal soul. He has the ability to see or know the eternal Forms of Beauty, Truth, Justice, Virtue, and so on. He has a moral life. His time on earth helps educate, shape or mould his eternal destiny.

Sorokin, after exhaustive historical study, concluded that all human cultures could be classified according to the extent to which they are organized around the principles of materialism, idealism, or some mixture of both. In a radically materialistic culture, the principle of life is "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." This is the philosophy of the sybarite or hedonist.

At the other extreme is radical idealism. Here the attitude is that the material world is either an illusion or altogether bad. Life on earth is a 'vale of tears.' The body wars against, or is a prison or tomb of the soul. This is the world-denying philosophy of Gnosticism and extreme asceticism.

Occasionally in history we see cultures that integrate or harmonize these two principles. Then the guiding attitude is that moral excellence is compatible with, or even the same thing, as pleasure and happiness. The material world becomes transfigured by being united with eternal values. We see approximations of this integral world-view in the Classical Period of ancient Greece and during the Renaissance. Looking beyond the theories of Sorokin, we see such integrated existence hinted at in the *mythos* of world religions. It is symbolized as the Kingdom of Heaven in Christianity, the Promised Land of Judaism, the Coming into Day of the ancient Egyptians, the Pure Land of Buddhism, the Sacred Marriage of alchemy. This principle of an integration of materialistic and idealistic elements of human nature, leading to unsurpassed happiness, would appear to be in the collective subconscious of mankind, a common dream, the source of our hope, and the very *telos* of our species and society.

While humanity has occasionally approached such an integral cultural orientation, more typically we have swung back and forth between extremes of materialism and idealism. However, both of these being essential parts of human nature, when one dominates, the other operates in the background as a opposing influence. This principle Sorokin termed the law of *immanent change*. There is a tension of opposites, and what appear to us to be the capricious events of history can often be understood as manifestations of this dynamic struggle. Historical study shows that the transition periods between one of these cultural orientations to the other are frequently characterized by social catastrophes – wars, revolutions, migrations, economic breakdowns, etc.

1.2 The Crisis of Modernity

This brings us to Sorokin's view of modern culture. Sorokin saw society in the West as being in the final stages of a dying materialistic culture. The wars and great revolutions of the 20th century (Sorokin himself lived through the convulsions of Russia in the period from 1917 to 1922) are, as it were, the death throes of a radical materialism that has

increasingly dominated the West since the 17th century. Sorokin, who died in 1968, would no doubt have seen the tremendous instability of the Middle East, 9/11 and its sequelae, and the continuing global economic meltdown as a continuation of the same massive cultural crisis that began in the 20th century. His model, moreover, makes a sobering prediction: these crises will continue until the prevailing radical materialism ceases to be the organizing principle of society. It is characteristic of a dying paradigm that increasingly more desperate efforts are made to sustain it, but this only worsens the crisis.

2. California's Master Plan for Higher Education

Again, Sorokin's theories imply that rather than exiting gracefully, it is characteristic of an obsolete paradigm to hang on desperately, creating an ever-worsening social and economic climate until a change occurs. We, arguably, may find some evidence of this principle by examining the shift of educational priorities in California over the last 50 years. California is unique among the states in having a formal Master Plan for its higher education. First implemented in 1960, the Master Plan has undergone periodic review and modification. A look at how the statement of goals in successive versions of the Master Plan is revealing.

The original *Master Plan for Higher Education in California*, published in 1960, contained no definitive statement of the goals or purpose of public higher education. The plan merely sought to expand and better organize the public universities, state colleges, and community colleges to cope with the imminent population increase associated with the baby boom.

The 1972 revision of the Plan (*The California Master Plan for Higher Education in the Seventies and Beyond*), however, began with a direct statement of the goals of California public higher education:

"California's goal in providing and maintaining public higher education is to encourage the development of well-educated citizenry as the best guarantee for a free and healthy society, one that is capable of intelligent adjustment to changing life conditions and that strives for improvement in the quality of life.

"This broad goal includes a public commitment to develop human resources as the State's greatest asset, to encourage the intellectual and personal development of each citizen over his lifetime to the fullest extent of his ability and application. This goal requires preparing the individual for productive participation in society by the development of abilities, attitudes, and skills in the application of self and knowledge for the constructive operation and improvement of society.

"More specific goals of public higher education are to provide to all of the State's citizens the widest opportunity and diversity of higher education and an unexcelled quality of instruction, research, and public service by which graduates

and other participants may develop and acquire abilities and experiences in independent thought, critical analysis, and decision making that are beneficial to the whole of society and to the individual." (pp. x–xi)

The goal statement was clearly oriented towards improvement of the individual, society as a whole, and "quality of life." It sought to "encourage intellectual and personal development of each citizen over his lifetime to the fullest extent." Specific mention is made of the need to promote "independent thought, critical analysis, and decision making", as skills essential to individual development and a free society.

Fifteen years later, in the 1987 *Master Plan Renewed: Unity, Equity, Quality, and Efficiency in California Postsecondary Education*, we see evidence of a shift of priorities. The introductory paragraph states:

"A vital, comprehensive, accessible, and excellent educational system is essential to the cultural, political, and economic health of a nation or state. Educational institutions provide the basic and specialized training necessary for an advanced workforce. They help to establish the common values underlying a stable, responsive political system. They nurture the creative talents essential to cultural richness and to scientific advance." (p. 1)

Written during the 'Reagan Revolution', the 1987 report now mentions, in addition to the need to promote cultural health, a united society, and a responsive political system, such economic and business-oriented goals as "economic health", an "advanced workforce", and "scientific advance".

By 1999, the report *Toward A State of Learning: California Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century* makes economic priorities even more prominent. Its Introduction states:

"California's colleges and universities—public and private—are essential to the state's economic strength, social progress, and the promise of individual opportunity." (p. i)

The themes of social progress and individual opportunity are still mentioned, but these are now subordinated to the goal of "economic strength." That is, economic strength has gone from the third-mentioned priority in 1987 to the first-mentioned in 1999.

So far in the 21st century there has been no definitive revision of the Master Plan, but there has been much discussion. Common sense might suppose that in the wake of a chronically weak economy, international financial crises, globalization, record foreclosure rates, corporate personhood, global warming, etc., policymakers would begin to question the wisdom of making business and economic expansion the organizing principle of American society. Citizens themselves have already begun to question this, as recently evidenced by the Occupy Movement. That is, if the hypothesis that human beings have idealistic as well as materialistic interests, logic might dictate that a shift

toward more idealistic and humanistic values should take effect once a narrow focus on materialism seems to have led to an impasse. But instead we see, as Sorokin predicted, increasingly desperate measures to prop up the materialistic status quo.

A concrete example of this paradox is the work of the organization, California Competes: Higher Education for a Strong Economy Council. The explicit goal of this organization is to "secure a stronger economy by building a talent pool whose creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship and industriousness matches the needs of the 21st century." The mission statement states flatly that:

"In the second half of the twentieth century, California emerged as an economic powerhouse, the envy not just of other states but of nations. The future of every Californian is dependent on maintaining that leadership—locally, regionally, and statewide—in an economy that has gone increasingly global."

California's future, that is, is defined exclusively in terms of economics. California is no longer admired for its healthy lifestyle, recreational opportunities, diverse geography, and friendly people. Its defining feature is as an "economic powerhouse."

It is of some interest to examine the backgrounds of the members and staff of the Council. There we find current and former executives and board members of Union Bank, First Interstate Bancorp, Wal-Mart, AT&T California, the San Diego Military Advisory Council, and the California Healthcare Foundation. We find Stanford Business School graduates and even a "Money Magazine 'hero' award winner."

A group more out of touch with values, needs, opinions, and sentiments of ordinary Californians could scarcely be imagined. Now one may say that to focus undue attention on this organization is unfair – it is merely one group among potentially many, reflecting a legitimate point of view, and part of a healthy exchange of opinions necessary in a democracy. But the problem is that there is no opposing point of view being represented. Banks and corporations have money with which to finance their campaign. Humanists do not. Sacramento lawmakers are going to hear only one side of the story. The predictable result is that vested money interests will carry the field, and higher education in California will increasingly reflect the forces of materialism while neglecting those of idealism, even though the perils of radical materialism are by this point evident to all.

The question we must ask is: does this excessively materialistic orientation truly reflect the attitudes, interests and needs of California citizens?

3. What is the 'American Dream'?

It is often said that California symbolizes or even epitomizes the American Dream. But what precisely is the American Dream? One way to investigate this question is to refer to the vision of America's Founders.

The writings of Thomas Jefferson, an iconic figure who continues to inspire Americans across the political spectrum, may serve as a bellwether for the opinions of the Founders here. In the Declaration of Independence which he authored, Jefferson asserted that the proper role of government is to secure "certain unalienable Rights", and, in particular, those of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Historians acknowledge that the British political philosopher John Locke was one source on which Jefferson used in writing the Declaration of Independence. Less commonly known are Jefferson's classical sources. In an 1825 letter to Henry Lee (Peterson, pp. 1500–1501), Jefferson also explicitly mentioned Aristotle and Cicero as among his authorities.

Jefferson, schooled in classics, and literate in both Latin and Greek, knew full well that the Western concept of happiness draws deeply from Greco-Roman philosophy. He knew that Aristotle defined happiness (*eudaimonia*) as a life of contemplation and virtue. He also knew that Cicero, one of his favorite writers, devoted one of his greatest works, *On Moral Ends*, to investigating the nature of happiness.

The influences of classical sources on Jefferson's conception of happiness are evident throughout in his writings. We need consider but a few examples to see his views.

In 1788, Jefferson advised his nephew, Peter Carr:

"Be assiduous in learning, take much exercise for your health, and practice much virtue. Health, learning and virtue will insure your happiness; they will give you a quiet conscience, private esteem and public honor. Beyond these, we want nothing but physical necessities, and they are easily obtained." (WE 2:409)

In 1816, Jefferson, in a letter to Amos Cook, put the matter even more succinctly: "Without virtue, happiness cannot be." (WE 6:532).

Preceding this statement in his letter, Jefferson supplied a long quotation from Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* (4.17.37), a philosophical work that has as its main theme that only moral virtue can secure enduring happiness in the face of unpredictable Fortune and the transitoriness of material goods.

In an 1822 exchange of letters, Jefferson wrote to Cornelius C. Blatchly of New York:

"I look to the diffusion of light and education as the resource most to be relied on for ameliorating the condition, promoting the virtue, and advancing the happiness of man.... In the present spirit of extending to the great mass of mankind the blessings of instruction, I see a prospect of great advancement in the happiness of the human race." (WE 7:263).

The context of this letter is noteworthy. Blatchly, a Quaker cleric and physician, helped found the New York Society for Promoting Communities, which advocated a form of

Christian communism, and he had sent Jefferson "an essay on common wealths" (Cunliffe & Erreygers, p. 9). Jefferson replied that while he thought that "communion of property" might work for small groups, it was unlikely that the same principle could be applied to the United States or individual States. The better solution, Jefferson argued, was to concentrate on universal education as a means to secure virtue and happiness for all.

Representative of his views on the relationship of education and government are comments of Jefferson in an 1786 letter to George Wythe:

"I think by far the most important bill in our whole code [of Virginia law] is that for the diffusion of knowlege among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised, for the preservation of freedom and happiness.... Preach, my dear Sir, a crusade against ignorance; establish and improve the law for educating the common people. Let our countrymen know that the people alone can protect us against these evils [of misgovernment]." (WE 2:7–8).

Jefferson firmly believed that education should be liberal. In the Diffusion of Knowledge Bill for Virginia he wrote:

"And whereas it is generally true that that people will be happiest whose laws are best, and are best administered, and that laws will be wisely formed, and honestly administered, in proportion as those who form and administer them are wise and honest; whence it becomes expedient for promoting the publick happiness that those persons, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens." (FE 2:221)

What Jefferson meant by liberal education is evident from the book lists he routinely sent to correspondents who sought his advice on reading and education. In these lists, Jefferson included books on science and economics. But even greater emphasis was placed on classics, philosophy, and history, both ancient and modern (Uebersax, 2013).

We may summarize Jefferson's views on the relationship of happiness, virtue, education, and government as follows: (1) that happiness requires virtue; (2) that education is necessary for both virtue and successful democracy; and (3) that education should be liberal.

It is hard to imagine any knowledgeable and honest Californian who would not endorse Jefferson's views on the relationship between virtue, education, and good government. Yet these values are not addressed in any serious or systematic way by today's California public higher education system or policies. Some might object, saying the views of Jefferson and the Founders are antiquated, that they belonged to a different age, before modern technology and the demands of a globalized economy. But this is not true. Within a few years of the ratification of the Constitution, the nation was already embroiled in an intense debate over priorities and alternative futures. Alexander

Hamilton promoted the path of banking, industrialization, and international commerce. Stock traders were already on Wall Street. Jefferson advocated a more agrarian economy and philosophical values. In his first administration, George Washington appointed both men to his cabinet: Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury and Jefferson as Secretary of State. Washington's actions thus placed our country on a path that balanced materialistic and idealistic principles.

4. Conclusion

Based on the preceding observations, which, in a sense, merely bring into focus what is evident to common sense and has been repeated for as long as colleges and universities have existed, *viz.*, that higher education ought to be liberal and to address both the technical and the humanistic needs of individuals and society. In terms of the present situation in California, the following four points, which serve as both conclusions and recommendations, are presented for consideration:

Explicit goals. Public higher education in California, no less than any other human activity, requires explicit goals. At present, such goals do not exist. This need must be met, and all parties involved must insist upon it. Clearly it is the position of the present paper that these goals should include equipping students with the values, ethics, and intellectual skills necessary for development of character and the attainment of individual potential and a harmonious society, as well as technical skills. But it is also suggested that the mere process of setting explicit goals will itself bring these issues to the surface, so that they will either be included, or conspicuous in their absence; in the latter case, citizens and educators will be able to, in one way or another, respond to and remedy this absence. However, at the present time, materialistic values exclusively dominate educational priorities, and, since these goals are merely implicit, nobody is made fully aware of this.

Humanist input. The parties currently driving public higher education planning in California are: (1) business interests, which wish to assure a steady flow of skilled job recruits; (2) faculty associations, which have a monetary interest in preserving jobs, pension funds, and the status quo; (3) university administrators, who today often seem more concerned with the fiscal issues of universities than their moral contributions; (4) minority groups and organizations, who may see public higher education principally as a means of achieving economic parity with non-minority groups; and (5) state politicians, who are, arguably, structurally more responsive to these aforementioned special interests than to the needs and interests of California citizens as a whole. Ultimately, all of these factions, to judge from their rhetoric at least, are materially and financially motivated. Ideal and humanistic values are without any organized representation. This limitation must be addressed in order for the state's public higher education to produce well-rounded graduates, a high quality of life, and California citizens equipped to meet the great challenges of preserving a healthy democracy in a difficult age.

Moreover, both business and minority interests would stand to gain by promoting liberal higher education in California. Businesses would have graduates not only with strong technical abilities, but also with improved creativity, confidence, self-direction, critical thinking skills, and good judgment. Minority graduates would have the breadth of character that enables them to maintain and develop their cultural identity, rather than lose it through assimilation into a vast, homogenous culture of materialism and selfish consumerism.

Reduce student debt. The burden of debt placed on students under the current system must be reduced. For several decades, the University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), and California Community College (CCC) systems have continued to raise tuition and fees at up to more than four times the rate of general inflation (Uebersax 2012; Uebersax 2009). The easy availability of student loans has allowed this unwise policy to continue unchecked, and supplied administrators and politicians with a convenient excuse for not finding more practical and sustainable means of economizing.

One of the most pernicious effects of student debt is that it works directly against the natural and healthy idealism of young people. A new graduate with \$20,000, \$40,000, \$60,000 or more of student loan debt must, almost of necessity, plunge directly into the job market. In a tight job market, there is a great incentive to compromise principles, and take work solely on the basis of pay rates. This is in stark contrast with previous generations, when it was the privilege of young people to experiment: to try life as an artist, a writer, a musician; to join a commune; to hike the Pacific Crest Trail, or make an extended trip overseas. Without an opportunity to have such experiences as these, students emerge from colleges and universities equipped for little else than acting as debtors, wage-slaves, and consumers, and with neither the time nor inclination to question a governmental and economic system that diminishes the human spirit.

Alternative education paradigms. Alternative curricula and education paradigms aimed at producing a more liberal and well-rounded education should be examined. As but one example of the many possible innovations, we suggest the possibility of instituting a standardized Great Books program across UC, CSU, and, potentially, CCC campuses. Such a program, modeled after those currently in place at St. John's University and elsewhere, would grant students credit up to some limit (which could potentially range from one year to four years of undergraduate study), for reading classic works of literature, history and philosophy on a pre-established book list. Participants could meet with other students and faculty to discuss the books. Tests or essay requirements could be established to verify that students read and understand the books.

The cost to develop and administer such a program would be comparatively low, especially if standardized across campuses. Being based on classics, the program would not become continually obsolete or require extensive revision. Cost savings associated with conducting the program, relative to conventional curricula, could be passed on to students in terms of reduced tuition and/or fees.

In addition to exposing students to the liberal and humanistic values which classics uniquely supply, such skills as reading ability, self-motivation, and independence of thought would be cultivated. Such a program clearly would not be suitable for all students. It could, however, be conducted as an honors program, requiring participants to have demonstrated competence and motivation before being accepted. Even if a relatively small proportion of students participated, and especially if these were those possessed of leadership skills, those who did participate would infuse California society with the values, creativity, and strength of character that only classics may supply.

It should be stated frankly that a liberal education implies more than a narrow emphasis on postmodern theories and extensions of New Left ideas – orientations for which modern public universities, and especially those in California, have been often criticized. A truly liberal education, by definition, must include exposure to classics. The prospect of continuing to produce college graduates the large majority of whom have neither read Hamlet, nor understand why they ought to, should not be accepted.

Faculty associations may wish to consider the benefits and opportunities a Great Books program may present to faculty as well as students. In particular, teachers would be able to spend more time interacting with students one-on-one or in small groups, pursuing ideas in greater depth than ordinary classroom activities typically permit, and reduce the time needed to be spent lecturing.

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