



The Plight of Public Higher Education

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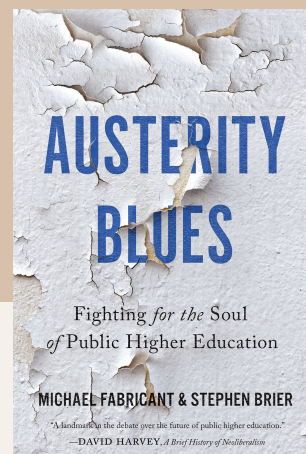


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Books Worth Reading

BY MARY TAYLOR HUBER

THE PLIGHT OF PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION



The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them, by Christopher Newfield. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. 448 pages. \$32.95 Hardback, \$32.95 E-book.

Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education, by Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. 320 pages. \$29.95 Hardback, \$29.95 E-book.

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What happens to public colleges and universities when confidence in the value of public institutions wanes? Nothing good, to judge from two new books whose titles telegraph the tale: *The Great Mistake*, by Christopher Newfield and *Austerity Blues*, by Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier. Written from a faculty perspective, these authors see the last thirty years of declining state appropriations, rising tuitions, and increasing student debt as a disaster. The privatization of public higher education has led not to better outcomes, these books argue, but to limited learning for students and greater inequality for the society at large.

The Great Mistake and *Austerity Blues* provide very similar analyses of the plight of public colleges and universities today. Yet even while working within the same critical framework, the authors make different choices about what to emphasize. *The Great Mistake* is the more comprehensive book, giving equal treatment to “eight stages of decline” that the author describes as a vicious cycle trapping public higher education today. *Austerity Blues* pays more attention

to the history of public colleges and universities, but focuses its analysis on two critical aspects of the story: the “public university as an engine of inequality” (Chapter 5) and the propensity of university managers to look to “technology as a ‘magic bullet’ in an era of austerity” (Chapter 6).

These are not books for readers interested in how universities can work smarter, design better programs, or operate more efficiently. The authors are not writing here about improvement through incremental change. They aim instead to fix a deeply flawed system that makes austerity thinking seem like common sense. In *The Great Mistake*, Newfield argues that the key to transforming a vicious cycle into a virtuous one is for our educational, business, and political leaders to reclaim the value of higher education as a public good. In *Austerity Blues*, Frabrant and Brier maintain that change is most likely to come from grass roots social movements of students, faculty, and staff.

Let’s look first at “the big mistake” that has “wrecked public universities,” according to Newfield, a professor of literature and American studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Newfield is author of several books on public higher education, co-editor of a blog, *Remaking the University*, and proud practitioner of “critical university studies.” For readers interested in the contours of this field, a brief perusal of the acknowledgements traces the author’s debts to colleagues, centers, and institutes in the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe.

So, what is that big mistake? The answer, phrased in various ways throughout the book, is that our country has failed to fight “to hang onto low-cost public colleges and their power to *democratize intelligence*” (p. 16). This book, the author writes, is about “how we’ve gotten to a place where the public university’s unique product—low-cost, no-debt, high-quality university learning on a mass scale, or *mass quality*—now seems both impossible and unnecessary” (p. 16).

Newfield begins by laying out the assumptions that he will oppose. “The conventional wisdom says that US public colleges have been weakened by public funding and public sector thinking....[and] will never again have the public funding they used to assume, so they must economize, commercialize, marketize, and financialize” (p. 3). This austerity framework is what has “wrecked” public universities, Newfield argues, but there is at least some good news. The need for such extreme levels of austerity is *not* inevitable: the damage, at least for tomorrow’s universities, can be undone. “Mass quality,” he maintains, is not permanently “out of reach.” (p. 16).

The Big Mistake is a work of synthesis. Newfield does offer original analyses of particularly opaque areas of university budgeting, such as cross-subsidies between teaching and research, and tells revealing war-stories from his own service in faculty governance. But the book is less a report on new research than a reorganization and reinterpretation—that is to say, a critique—of much that is already reasonably

well-known (state subsidy levels, tuition rates, student debt levels, and so on). It’s well-written, passionately argued, and, for the most part, a lively read.

Newfield’s argument is divided into three main parts. There’s an introductory section providing an overview of the partial shift from public to private funding of public universities beginning around 1980; a central section with one chapter each on the eight stages of these institutions’ consequent decline; and a concluding chapter on what’s needed to start a “recovery cycle” and reconstruct the public sector of higher education. As the book’s title promises, the central focus is on public *universities*, but not only the public ivies—the analysis extends to broad access universities, public four-year colleges, and to some extent, community colleges as well.

What’s at stake when you starve public higher education, Newfield says, is the future of some three-quarters of all college students. The “mass commodity learning that was thought to be sufficient for non-elite students during the rapid growth of college attendance after WWII” is no longer well rewarded in the workplace (p. 6). Yet public colleges and universities are not upping their game to provide the “generalized *creativity learning*” that students need to successfully navigate personal, economic, and civic life today. Instead, public colleges and universities are “being pushed relentlessly” toward cheapening the educational experience they offer (p. 6).

Since the early 1980s, Newfield notes, influential critics on the ascendant right of the political spectrum have attributed problems faced by public higher education to their insulation from market forces made possible by public funding. Liberal critics have tended to blame problems on cuts in public funding, while acquiescing to the argument that state budgets could no longer afford to support public higher education at earlier levels. All sides agreed that austerity was called for, efficiencies should be pursued, and alternative

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sources of funding found. “The consensus wisdom was that college overspending, university mismanagement, a lack of mission focus, and insufficient use of technology were at least as important as public funding cuts in contributing to the sector’s growing mediocrity” (p. 22).

The solution that emerged was to expose colleges and universities to market discipline through privatization—a partial shift in control “from public officials to private interests” (p. 28). Many manifestations of this shift are well known. Newfield cites the increasing share of costs shouldered by students and families; outsourcing of services; enhanced control by “private funders of specific activities” (p. 29); greater emphasis on the private benefits of higher education and less attention to higher education as a public good; and the growing tendency to see the “educated person” primarily as “an economic subject” (p. 30).

Indeed, Newfield argues, “privatization is subjecting public universities to a permanent redesign” (p. 32). It’s a tragedy of the commons tale, in which a formerly valuable public resource becomes depleted through overuse and exploitation. Privatization’s advocates claim that it will bring “efficiency and progress” to the public sector (p. 37). Newfield does not agree. His analysis suggests that public universities are, in effect, subsidizing many external (including for-profit) entities whose contributions don’t cover the costs of the services and goods they fund. In the process, public higher education’s “core educational activities,” have been made “mediocre—and more expensive” (p. 32).

How the privatization process works to produce such poor outcomes is explored in the central section of this book on “the eight stages of decline.”

The retreat of university leaders from the position that higher education is a public good (Stage 1) did not necessarily initiate this devolutionary cycle, Newfield maintains, but their failure to argue an effective case for the public benefits of broad access to a high-quality college education has enabled the cycle’s unchecked spin. Indeed, many leaders

acceded to the post-Reagan consensus—a carefully constructed belief that the low-tax, small government policies favored by the political and business elite was favored by the public as well. In this ideological climate, little attention was paid to the full range of benefits that higher education provides to individuals or society. In the dominant discourse of the day, higher education’s value was understood primarily in terms of private market benefits: the capabilities and credentials that allowed graduates to go on to middle class careers.

Yet this strategy of “overselling the private goods and downplaying the public” has had deleterious effects, Newfield says (p. 74). First, it tied universities “to a *declining* private good: middle class salaries” (p. 74). Second, it “undermined [universities’] ability to deliver the *emerging* private good, which was not standardized job preparation but creative capabilities on a mass scale” (p. 75). Under increasing pressure to cut costs even in their core educational activities, Newfield argues, public universities have found it hard to justify the higher costs of pedagogies and programs that provide the individual attention and opportunities needed for students to develop the kinds of problem-solving skills rewarded in the job market today.

“Finally,” Newfield claims, “in failing to make the strong case for their [institutions’] social, non-market, and indirect benefits, public university managers weakened their case for public funding” (p. 76). And it could have been a strong argument. Newfield cites two studies published around the time of the recent financial crisis. These works “established that *only* strong public funding had historically created the general capabilities that enabled economic health [Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz’s *The Race between Education and Technology*, 2008] because most educational benefits were nonmarket, indirect, and social, and thus escaped private market calculations [Walter McMahon’s *Higher Learning, Greater Good: The Private and Social Benefits of Higher Education*, 2009]” (p. 74).

Indeed, in addition to publicizing McMahon's finding that over half of the total benefits of higher education are social benefits, Newfield proposes that advocates for adequate public funding "might have gone beyond it, by noting that even the private market benefits stemmed from public practices past and present. They could have argued that treating total benefits nondualistically, as an inextricable mixture of public and private, justify something closer to 100 percent public support." (p. 77). That they didn't, the author concludes, has made it hard for politicians and the public to judge the real effects of privatization.

Those effects provide the themes for the chapters on the next several stages of decline. In seeking external sponsors for specific activities (Stage 2), universities became adept at privatizing, at winning funds for research, building projects, new programs, and a variety of other targeted activities. But while these monies increased university income, they often did not cover associated expenses—even with seemingly generous grants for indirect costs. The difference had to be subsidized by state allocations and student tuition necessitating, Newfield claims, cross-subsidies from the humanities and social sciences, which did *not* bring in so many expensive external research dollars.

The largest source of new external funding for public universities was, of course, students and their families through tuition hikes (Stage 3) that actually exceeded state funding cuts (Stage 4) and may even have convinced legislators and other officials that cuts could be endured. Student and family debt to pay for tuition and other costs grew apace (Stage 5), sometimes propelled by "gapping"—a practice in which many colleges and universities write a certain level of unfunded expense into their financial aid formulas for all students, often the same for poor and rich alike. Among the downsides: students who work excessive hours to cover some of these unfunded expenses suffer the loss of time for study and campus activities; debt that can burden students and families for years to come; and a great deal of money that goes to banks in the form of interest and fees—not to the universities themselves.

In addition to securing alternative sources of revenue, campuses have also sought ways to cut costs—in part through outsourcing a variety of functions to private vendors (Stage 6), including firms "that promised to use their technology to deliver more education for less money" (p. 223). Some experiments, like Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), were pushed through outside the usual norms of faculty oversight and did not deliver on their promises of lower costs or better learning. Unfortunately, Newfield observes, they "damaged the public understanding of learning," by discrediting and misrepresenting the actual pedagogical efforts of faculty and the levels of engagement and study that learning in college requires (p. 254).

Not surprisingly, the privatization of public higher education has hit some institutions and some people harder than others (Stage 7). "The growing dependence of public college

budgets on private funds, particularly net tuition, relentlessly widened the instructional resource gap among university types....[leading] to a well-known decline in US college attainment, in large part by damaging the colleges attended by most low-income students and students of color" (p. 257). In Newfield's analysis, limited learning and disappointing outcomes are not primarily due to the inadequacies of students or their professors (as suggested by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's well-known study), but to declining resources in broad-access colleges and universities that restrict both teaching and support for learning.

In the eighth stage of devolution, "a downgraded and unevenly funded network of public universities speeds the transition from a large, culturally dominant middle class to a smaller, more insecure one" (p. 283). Newfield does not suggest that colleges and universities themselves are responsible for the post-middle class society—we can thank globalization and technology for that. But he does suggest that our university system is producing precisely the results that the new economy demands. Public higher education is, Newfield says, "exactly as good as it needs to be to produce masses of *post-middle-class workers* with the commodity version of 'high skill' that [now] entitles them to low wage." (pp. 300–301).

If that's all that's needed, why should the states pay more? The short answer, Newfield suggests, is that is *not* all that's needed. We need to reclaim higher education's *social* mission, including its role in providing "creative capability for all," and "confront the global political economy that removes this core mission and its public funding" (p. 301). In fact, Newfield sees room for hope, arguing in his conclusion for a recovery cycle built on a few key "working principles: a public good vision focused on nonmarket and social educational benefits; zeroed-out private subsidies and their replacement with equitable partnerships; rebuilt public

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funding that eliminates student debt; elite training on a mass scale for regular students; and the reconstruction of the productivity wage” (p. 339).

That’s a very tall order—and Newfield recognizes it as such. He recalls a conversation with a colleague urging him to provide readers with a set of recommendations. But Newfield is wary about that level of detail, because “we can’t get there from here” (p. 340). We need college and university leaders and allies among the faculty, in politics, and in business to make the case about the public benefits of higher education. “Everything we need to achieve—sustainable economics, racial equality, cross-cultural accommodation, environmental justice, radically reduced warfare....depend on ending the scarcity of transformative public higher education” (p. 340).

The timing is urgent, perhaps more so now than when *The Great Mistake* was written, toward the end of the Obama administration, when the author could write that the necessary “ethos and paradigm...have been coming into view” (p. 340). Yet one cannot help but wonder how persuasive this argument would be in the climate that now prevails in the early months of the Trump presidency. It’s no longer clear that all of the goals Newfield enumerates are widely embraced, nor is it certain that the public mood is so favorable to the university-educated level of expertise needed to attain them. Perhaps something more grassroots and grittier is also needed if the decline of public higher education is to be stalled and Newfield’s recovery cycle begun.

Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education takes the argument into the streets rather than (or perhaps in addition to) the bully pulpit and boardroom. The authors, Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier, are professors of social work and of urban education, respectively, at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center. They introduce themselves as white men from working class families who “entered college...in a remarkable, all-too-brief moment in the history of higher education when dramatic growth brought the contemporary public university into being” (p. 1). Coming of age in the “long decade of the 1960s, the authors were part of a generation that experienced the “public university as an epicenter of critical social struggles” (p. 2).

Like Newfield, the authors of *Austerity Blues* are critical of the country’s subsequent years of public disinvestment in higher education and paint a familiar picture of privatization’s consequences—high tuition, high student debt, rising inequality of resources and results. Fabricant and Brier also share with Newfield the view that “increased and targeted public investment, not efficiencies driven by austerity, remains the best, most responsible way to increase the quality of public higher education” (p. 4). *Austerity Blues*, however, gives more attention than *The Great Mistake* to the political-economic context of public higher education’s rise and fall, and greater emphasis to the power of social movements to shift the terms of public debate.

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The contextual picture, painted in Part 1, begins with a chapter that asks readers to see the privatization of public assets as one consequence of the “economic crisis of global capital” facing “ever-greater difficulties in producing historic levels of profit” (p. 20). This crisis “was used to promote intensified rationing and growing inequality in the distribution of public or state resources” (p. 21) with a “profound impact on the content and structure of public goods” (p. 24).

As these goods decline in quality, there is a “legitimizing discourse” about the failures of public provision and the superiority of “market principles” (p. 31), a “reallocation of public resources to privatized experiments,” which “results in dramatic disinvestment in poor and working-class citizens of color and their communities,” (p. 31). Finally, “as wealth and income gaps grow....there is an increased public and private investment in surveillance, control, and outright repression” (p. 33). Public higher education, the authors argue, has been one of many institutions caught up in this trap.

Fabricant and Brier then turn to the history of public higher education, beginning with the federal role, including the Morrill Land Grant of 1862, which provided funding for states to establish colleges that taught agricultural and mechanical arts; the Great Depression’s work-study programs and two-year college centers for the unemployed; World War II’s research and training programs; and the GI Bill of 1944, which triggered a boom in public higher education as states struggled to build capacity to serve the two million veterans who went to college up through the late 1950s and their children in the following decade. Policy makers of the time presented this expansion as another step—following the New Deal and the War—in defending and deepening US democracy. “We are attempting,” the author of the influential

Zook Commission (also known as the Truman Commission) reports of 1947 wrote, “to give a greater vitality to the moral commitments that lie at the base of the American way of life.” (p. 46).

Things did not always go smoothly on the ground, the authors note, contrasting the path of public higher education in New York State, which suffered opposition from private and Catholic college leaders; New York City, which was reluctant initially to add two-year colleges to the four municipal colleges already established; and California, which expanded its state colleges to accommodate the rapidly growing number of students after the war and later provided a national model with its 1960 Master Plan for a comprehensive state system of universities, four-year colleges, and community colleges.

A third contextual chapter brings the story up to the era of privatization, recounting the build-up of pressures with the political unrest at public universities in the 1960s and the conservative opposition and fiscal crises that followed. “College uprisings contributed to the national revitalization of powerful conservative forces, which traced its roots to a California-based opposition not only to the radical forces of mass student protest occurring across the state but also to rising tax support for public institutions” (p. 79). Governor Ronald Reagan, who as president later pushed national policy in the same direction, used California’s fiscal crisis of the late 1960s as an excuse for budget cuts claiming that there are “certain intellectual luxuries that perhaps we could do without” (p. 79).

And it wasn’t just in California. In 1976, New York City’s “fiscal crisis and its aftermath” led to severe budget cuts for CUNY, the end of free tuition, tighter admission standards, and a sharp decline in the number of students, especially blacks and Latinos. “CUNY’s decline would continue for

two more decades as conservative politicians and business leaders used neoliberal arguments to malign its contributions and further cut public investment in its operating budget” (p. 88). In summary, the authors remark: “CUNY and other New York City public services were canaries in the coal mines of the global neoliberal offensive” (p. 88).

The major manifestations of neoliberal reform—privatizing on the one hand, austerity on the other—are the focus of Part Two. In their overview, Fabricant and Brier identify two stages of these reforms. The first has seen the rise of student debt, for-profit colleges, services sold to nonprofits, the search for income through technology transfer, pressures on faculty, and changes that allow managers to reach into areas formerly under faculty control. The second stage, the authors suggest, has seen the move to increase online instruction in an increasingly competitive market. The story of CUNY’s controversial Pathways program, a system-wide general education reform, officially aimed at smoothing transfer between campuses, is offered as an example of management overreach that, like many online learning initiatives, bypassed normal faculty control.

Fabricant and Brier share with Newfield (and many others) the view that austerity policies have made the public university “an engine of inequality” (the title of Chapter 5). This is especially evident, the authors argue, at nonelite publics, which have little to cushion them from budget cuts and where poor and minority students are most likely to enroll. These students are also the most likely to incur heavier debt loads and work longer hours than others, leaving less time available for study and diminishing their experience of higher education. By forcing under-resourced institutions to scrimp on maintenance, facilities, faculty, and student services, austerity policies have lowered the quality of education on offer.

Technology’s promise of a “magic bullet” to cut costs and, in some cases, broaden access gets its own chapter in *Austerity Blues* (Chapter 6). Of course, there’s a long history of technologies that have been embraced in this way: the authors cite correspondence courses, film, radio, television, computers, open educational resources, and MOOCs and other online only courses. University involvement has had mixed motivations, including fear of missing out on a market that other groups were tapping, a desire to cut costs, accompanied (or legitimated by) a desire to democratize education. Michael Crow’s reorganization of Arizona State University, including a variety of high profile online experiments, is cited as an extreme example of what institutional leaders hope technology can do today: “He basically believes he can out-innovate...the countervailing twin forces of austerity and inequality that are hollowing out the very core of public higher education” (p. 195).

Yet Fabricant and Brier are not convinced. Most often, they argue, the least advantaged students have “borne the brunt of technological solutions through their higher failure and lower completion rates in online courses they are often

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required to take” (p. 198). At most broad-access institutions, these students get less academic support, less face time with instructors, fewer encounters with full-time faculty. “The cost-reduction, profit-making, and labor-saving drives of distance-learning technologies when linked to austerity and the market further exacerbate the inequalities” already described (p. 198).

For these authors, the promise of technological innovation to enhance rather than diminish the quality of teaching and learning will only happen when it is “fully embraced and determined by faculty members, rather than by cost-cutting administrators and/or profit-driven entrepreneurs” (p. 199). If trusting the faculty sounds impractical, naïve, or overly idealistic, if bringing external suppliers (like those providing platforms for online education) into the “core work of higher education” sounds like a reasonable, savvy way to proceed, you have come to the nub of the problem, as depicted in *Austerity Blues*. “These austerity-driven initiatives,” the authors write, “have become part of a naturalized policy discourse that assumes no other options exist for achieving a quality higher education.” (p. 203).

Fabricant and Brier are not sanguine about the possibilities of changing that discourse from the top. The political field in which public officials and policy makers operate “has been flooded with money from dominant economic interests” (p. 205). For them, “what is needed is a political struggle joining students with faculty and staff to press for a redistribution of resources sufficient to underwrite the necessary supports, reduced class size, rigor, and curricular complexity to assure expanded access, more timely graduation, and, perhaps most importantly a high-quality education” (p. 226).

What kind of struggle? Illustrations include current campaigns aimed at “pushing back against debt financing and loan indenture” (p. 227), free tuition at community colleges, and improving conditions for part-time faculty. Such struggle, the authors claim, should be “linked to a range of

potentially complementary campaigns in K–12 education, health care, environmental justice, and development of low- to moderate-priced housing,” (p. 227). As an example, they cite efforts by public unions and community organizations to support public services through higher taxes.

Fabricant and Brier share with Newfield the belief that it is necessary to go beyond local and single-issue campaigns to “scale up” the struggle to gain the “economic and political might needed” to redirect public resources to higher education and other public goods (p. 246). But the authors differ when they ask how to get there. Newfield emphasizes the role of university leaders (and by extension, leaders in other institutional domains) in making the case for the full range of public and private goods that a properly financed public higher education can deliver. Fabricant and Brier think that the power to move minds and hearts “must grow out of continuing local organizing struggles to scale up, link up, and win, in turn producing variant forms of redistributive justice and an emancipatory education” (p. 248).

Clearly, *The Great Mistake* and *Austerity Blues* are focused on the long game for restoring the fortunes of public higher education (and, indeed, other public institutions as well). No doubt, some readers will be put off by the authors’ determination to change the privatization paradigm rather than seek better ways of living within it. Others more sympathetic to the authors’ agenda may nonetheless fear that the 2016 U.S. presidential election has made the restoration of public funding for colleges and universities an ever more distant goal.

Yet maybe the publication of these books is not so badly timed, after all. Is it possible that the open disdain for public institutions, so prevalent in today’s political discourse, will spark exactly the kinds of advocacy and resistance that both books call for? Will the higher education community begin to correct “the great mistake” or will it lay low, singing the “austerity blues,” until the political screw turns again? We shall see. □