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The People's University: A History of the California State University, by Donald R. Gerth, Berkeley Public Policy Press, Institute of Governmental Studies, U. of California, Berkeley, 2010.

California's Preeminence in World
Higher Education Is Waning: Review
of *The People's University: A History
of the California State University*

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I have, on occasion, gently chided the authors whose books I was reviewing for not writing the book I thought they ought to have written, rather than the one I was ana-

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lyzing. Not this time. Don Gerth has written the definitive study of the giant California State University system and has left no stone unturned in doing so. For his efforts, he may be deemed guilty of what the jargon calls "cognitive overload"—the coverage of so many highly technical details that it defies the ability of even conscientious readers to master them and to retain them.

If so, it was a necessary evil, for sooner or later, some scholar had to come along and analyze the remarkable evolution of this vast system. Gerth, who was a system president for 27 years on two of the many campuses, has done this and done it extremely well. His notes reveal scores of interviews with relevant parties and examination of archival material from seemingly every relevant source. Every aspect that I can think of, ranging from the obvious access, affordability, and quality issues that he highlights, to other important ones such as finance, governance, col-

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lective bargaining, academic planning, building programs, —all these and even more are covered in the 616 pages of text plus Appendices and Index.

Because I am praising the author and the book so highly, this might be the place to undertake what the British House of Commons demands from its various speakers: “to declare an interest” if they have some sort of personal ties with the interests and/or the persons being discussed. Don and I were collegemates at San Francisco State College (as it then was) from 1959 until I left to go to SUNY-Buffalo in 1969. We did not interact often, but when we did, he as nearly full-time administrator and I as full-time teacher (albeit on frequent leaves to do research or undertake projects), we operated in a context of high mutual respect. That condition has not changed over the years, as I have watched his career go from success to success, and he has been kind enough to stay in touch with me, even inviting me as a short-term visiting scholar at California State University, Sacramento when he was president there.

Has this friendship affected my ability to examine his book critically? I will later offer three different degrees of criticism and leave it to the readers to decide if I have been able to be objective.

My major concern with his otherwise excellent, balanced analysis concerns, perhaps not by coincidence, the area in which I have personally specialized over the years —statewide coordination of higher education. He treats the

famous California Master Plan of 1960 with great respect, furnishing fascinating accounts of behind-the-scenes negotiations, particularly between Clark Kerr, president of the University of California, and Glenn Dumke, then president of San Francisco State and head of the State College team negotiating the Master Plan.

Gerth worked for Dumke at SFSC and obviously has admired his work over the years, when Dumke later became chancellor of the emerging State College system. (Gerth’s admiration for, and access to, Dumke does not keep him from later noting a few of the shortcomings of Dumke’s style of leadership, which apparently did not enjoy the cut and thrust of the politics of higher education policy at the state capital.)

But, getting back to the Master Plan and Gerth’s balanced treatment of it, he notes that for all its many values and deserved worldwide reputation, it had two major shortcomings: long-run finance and statewide coordination. He recognizes that the Plan really looked only 15 years into the future, to 1975 and points out that later events, such as Proposition 13 (putting a lid on property taxes), huge demographic growth, etc., have raised severe problems with the state’s ability to continue the triad mentioned above: access, affordability, and quality.

Later, Gerth offers some passing thoughts on a variety of ways in which financial problems might be addressed (e.g., year-round operation; three-year degrees;

reduced curriculum areas, better use of technology), but one is, alas, left with the feeling that the Golden State has nearly run out of ways to square the circle, and that California's preeminence in world higher education domains is already slipping and will continue to slip. Perhaps I read the lengthy opus too quickly, but I got the impression that he did not pay sufficient attention to the enormous impact of the rapidly increasing Latinization of California's population. This, along with other variables, will have huge consequences on the state's ability to finance all levels of education, including higher education.

But if Gerth treats the Master Plan weakness in finance with considerable care, I was disappointed with his relatively thin analysis of the failure of the state's two coordinating boards to plan and coordinate the complex layers adequately. Obviously, to try to get the powerful University of California system, the now California State University system, the huge sector of California community colleges, and the important private sector all working together, rather than, as Gerth notes, as "silos," would be a very demanding task for any statewide body so mandated. But Gerth does not seem to recognize that a major weakness of the statewide board lies in the constitutional autonomy of the University system. Long cherished as a vital part of its bid for world stature, this autonomy precludes any state agency from intervening in any significant way in the University's academic core. Yes, the Coordinating Council or later

the California Postsecondary Education Commission was given by the legislature an important role in approving the state's need for new campuses, and yes, these boards could require the segments to furnish data on relevant issues. But a major leadership role was denied these boards and, with the exception of the leadership period of Pat Callan, whose influence personally and on the board carried it beyond its modest legal powers, the state boards have not given the state the vision and the knowledge necessary to lead it out of the abyss into which it seems to have fallen.

Mind you, as a Berkeley doctorate myself, I do not lightly suggest stripping the University of its constitutional autonomy, but I do suggest a much closer examination of the links between such autonomy and creating a state board with the stature, the leadership, and the budget to do the job. Certainly, along the way over the past years, neither the University nor the State University system welcomed the idea of a really stronger state board. But Gerth's last chapter, which deserves to be reprinted and distributed more widely than probably his huge book will be, is an eloquent plea for the unfinished business of the state, not just exclusively for the State University system, but for the whole state.

Gerth is very good at analyzing the long road to University status for the state college system. He is balanced enough to note that the Master Plan in 1960 was "right" (p. 237) to deny university status to the state colleges, then

just emerging as the beginnings of a system from long and loose oversight by the State Board of Education. According to Gerth, they needed time to “mature” and this, to their credit, they did, as the years passed and the various chancellors and board members worked to make the system function more as a system, and not just a jumble of separate institutions.

He gives Dumke appropriate credit for staying by his 1960 agreement with Clark Kerr not to get the state colleges into doctoral work, beyond the compromise “Joint Doctorate” called for in the Master Plan, but never a road subsequently heavily travelled with the exception of San Diego State. The Joint Doctorate allows the former state colleges to award doctorates in areas where a University of California campus—or later a private university—would agree to participate as partner. Notwithstanding his views on the doctorate, Dumke did support efforts to change the name of the system to the California State University.

Later chancellors pursued an independent doctorate, first in education, and perhaps later in other applied fields. Here I must confess to a prejudice: I don’t think that the criteria formed evidently first in the CSU office and then apparently by the state coordinating board are an adequate set to determine the qualifications of an institution to be called a university. To me the heavy presence of advanced doctoral work and professional education (e.g., law, medicine, engineering, etc.) would be needed. But, to be fair, this movement from state college to university status has

occurred all over the country, and I strongly fault both the regional accrediting process and the state boards for not having the courage to take on this hot political potato.

Related to both the name change and the independent doctorate is the issue of state authorization for faculty research in the State University “related to its primary teaching function.” While a fifth of a loaf may be better than no loaf, this relatively narrow focus, if enforced, would preclude faculty research in their disciplines *not* related to teaching. Given the fact that most faculty are so oriented to their disciplines, I anticipate that this issue still remains to be resolved. The University has opposed any efforts to broaden that research focus.

One senses that, particularly in the current state fiscal climate, it is viewed as a “zero-sum game,” and more funds for the State University faculty research might mean fewer funds for the University.

On the plus side again, Gerth treats another controversial item, collective bargaining, with balance and sophistication. One can tell that he, like Dumke, would encourage the campus faculty Senates to realize their potential for shared governance more than going the CB route. But he carefully describes the various steps in the evolution of the issue over the years in the system, and evidently now, most parties have learned to live with it, whatever their personal feelings.

Gerth also correctly points out the major disappointment with the 1990 effort by the Organization for Econom-

ic Cooperation and Development in Paris (OECD) to bring a high-powered three-person study task force to analyze California's system of higher education. Notwithstanding its being chaired by the British intellectual giant, Chelly Halsey from Oxford, the report did not have the effect of laying out a map for the improved future of the state's system of higher education. When both state coordination and international study teams do not provide the vision, where will it come from?

One final quibble: in a work of this enormous detail, I found the index very inadequate. Probably Gerth was exhausted by the end of the huge research, but ideally, the Press would have hired a professional to break down the long, long lists of page numbers under many different headings. For example, under the heading, Los Angeles, there are 16 lines of numbers indicating some treatment of that topic. But what kind of treatment of which issues is nowhere given, and researchers wanting to use this fine book will have to dig much too much to find relevant passages.

I want to end this review by quoting at length from Don Gerth at his best. Buried quietly in a section on presidential leadership in Chapter 11 on Governance (p. 413) is this outstanding bit of philosophy:

Holding a college or university presidency is a rare privilege. Only a small number of academics

have the opportunity to be a president or a chancellor, rector, or vice-chancellor, whatever the title. This is not to say that academics necessarily desire to hold an administrative role. An even smaller number of individuals from outside academia share in the privilege. So what is the privilege? It is not about managing, though managing a complex institution with a high percentage of well-educated employees can be interesting. It is not about power, as power in a healthy university or college is widely distributed. It is not even necessarily about leadership, though leadership of a college or university, most often both within and without the institution, can be demanding and exhilarating. It is about the life of the mind and the intellectual and creative interpersonal skills that grow in students as they prepare for productive and useful and rewarding lives. The privilege of the job is in creating, developing, and recreating an institution that is at the heart of a responsible learning society, and being responsible for the strength and quality and integrity of an academic community and its role in the greater society.

Well spoken, Don Gerth, the president, and well written, Don Gerth, the author.