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# Critical Analysis of the Master Plan for Higher Education in California

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**Abstract**

The Master Plan for Higher Education in California is often touted as the pinnacle of success in terms of its contributions to establishing open-access, (nearly) tuition-free higher education for all Californians who wish to pursue it. This perception, though, may be skewed, as it does not take into account the historical context of the Plan, nor its potential flaws and shortcomings. This article provides an analysis and critique of the Master Plan, applying historical and theoretical lenses to frame a more complete picture of the Plan both at its 1960 inception and today. Viability of the Plan in the early 21st Century is also explored, and strategies for mitigating some of its shortcomings are identified.

**Keywords**

Master Plan, higher education, equity, higher education in California

**Author Statement**

Joanna M. Oxendine is the Institutional Effectiveness Associate at California State University, San Bernardino and is currently pursuing her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership. Her passion for equitable education for all students began as a classroom teacher and continues to be her primary area of focus.

**Cover Page Footnote**

The author thanks Dr. Edna Martinez whose instruction provided the basis of the critical lenses through which this analysis was undertaken.

The Master Plan for Higher Education in California is often touted as the State's penultimate commitment to higher education for all who would seek it (Douglass, 2010), a shining example of higher education's intended democratizing role and function and to the State of California's commitment to ensuring upward mobility of its citizens through open access, tuition-free, higher education. Unfortunately, though, this understanding is limited in that it appears to see the Master Plan only through what some might deem the rose-colored glasses of idealism, of what it once was, rather than what it has become. To fully understand the Master Plan, we must critique and analyze it, not from the standpoint of the romanticized version of the plan we so often like to invoke in support of higher education in California, but through the critical lenses of history and context, of institutional posturing and self-preservation, and recent neoliberalist policies. It is only by more fully understanding the Master Plan both within its 1960 context and the shifting political climate of the last forty years that we can begin to unravel what, if any of it, is viable in the 21st century, or if it even is worth saving.

## History and Context

Like many other U.S. states following World War II, California was bracing itself for a sharp rise in the number of students enrolling in its institutions of higher education. In the decades that preceded, California saw massive expansions in institutions of higher education at all levels, with legislators pursuing new campuses in their districts with little regard for overall state needs (Callan, 2009; Douglass, 2000; 2010). However, by the late 1950s, the State's wartime surplus had been all but depleted, and California was facing its largest budget deficit since the Great Depression (Douglass, 2010). With returning veterans' use of their GI Bills and the coming-of-age of Baby Boomers on the horizon, both legislative officials and higher education administrators saw a need to proactively plan and prepare for the expansion of higher education in the State (Callan, 2009; Douglass, 2000; 2010; Geiser & Atkinson, 2010).

Coinciding with this push to thoughtfully prepare for the future was the desire of the State's regional colleges (now the California State University system), led primarily by Malcolm Love, then-president of San Diego State College, to expand the purview of the state colleges by: 1) removing them from the oversight of the State Board of Education and creating a separate governing/oversight board, similar to the University of California's Board of Regents; 2) expanding the degree programs of the state colleges to include engineering and the doctorate in education; and 3) ensuring state funding to support research at the state colleges (Douglass, 2000). Rather than fight head-on the state college presidents as his predecessor Robert Gordon Sproul may have, newly-appointed University of California (UC) president, Clark Kerr, began to strategize ways to "move the public segments—the university, state colleges, and junior colleges—toward a negotiated settlement and to create 'an orderly plan' for higher education in California" (Douglass, 2000, p. 255), one that would ensure the UC's top-tier institution status within the state's higher education system.

Fearing that the legislature would approve new state colleges without sufficiently assessing the State's higher education needs and driven to protect the UC's political position and its share of state resources, Kerr proposed a study in 1959 that would bring leaders of the already existent tripartite system together to construct a compromised, negotiated plan to collectively move the state's higher education system forward in an organized, cost-effective manner. Kerr's hope was that this would be enough to stave off legislative intrusion and interference into the inner workings of higher education and settle some of the turf wars—in particular, the state colleges' encroachment on the mission of the UC—arising in the tripartite system (Douglass, 2000; Geiser & Atkinson, 2010). Alternatively, and to the disdain of State Board of Education members like Raymond Daba, Kerr explored the idea of the UC's absorption of the state colleges should negotiations fail or the legislature not support such a study (Douglass, 2000). He also enlisted the help of Assemblywoman, Dorothy Donahoe (D), by presenting her with "a draft of a resolution he hoped she might carry in the legislature…[one that would ask] the regents and the State Board of Education to provide a plan" (Douglass, 2000, p. 259-260) for higher education and place a two-year moratorium on all higher education legislation (Callan, 2009). Donahoe, a former high school administrator and opponent of the unchecked growth of the state colleges, agreed and presented Assembly Concurrent Resolution 88 (ACR 88) to the legislature. Its passage ensured the State Board of Education's acquiescence to the study and quelled Kerr's fears that the study may go incomplete, leaving the ultimate fate of the UC's status in the hands of the legislature (Callan, 2009; Douglass, 2000). By July of 1959, Kerr and State Superintendent of Education, Roy Simpson, had assembled a team of nine, led by Arthur Coons, president of Occidental College, for the Master Plan Survey Team (Douglass, 2000).

As noted by higher education historian John Aubrey Douglass (2010), "perhaps the most profound impact of the 1960 Master Plan is not what it changed, but what it prevented" (p. 6). The "California Idea", as proposed by Douglass—open access, high quality, affordable higher education for all high school graduates—had long been established in California by the Progressives of the early 1900s (though it is often erroneously attributed as a new goal or ideal set forth by the Master Plan), and the 1920s and 1930s saw a rapid-response expansion of higher education, especially within the community and state colleges (Douglass, 2000; 2010). Thus, though the state's foreseen need to grow in terms of its higher education system(s), as well as its longstanding progressive-era belief that higher education was an inalienable right of its citizens, may have informed or aligned with some aspects of the Master Plan, they certainly were not new ideals created by it. Rather, the Master Plan appears more likely born of the UC's drive to protect its position at the top, ensure elite students' access to the UC, and safeguard its hold on state resources and is significant more "for what it preserved than for what it invented" (Douglass, 2010, p. 2).

## The Plan: Its Principal Points and Early Merits

After many months of laborious and sometimes hostile negotiations between representatives of the UC, state colleges, and community colleges, the California Master Plan for Higher Education was submitted to the legislature for review in February of 1960. Kerr and Superintendent Simpson jointly urged legislators to view the sixty-some recommendations as a package deal, one whose success was reliant upon all points being acted on together as a whole, rather than as individual stand-alone pieces (Douglass, 2000). At the time of its acceptance, the Master Plan solidified the state's existing tripartite system and affirmed the notion of California's commitment to universal access to higher education (Callan, 2009; Douglass, 2000; 2010; Geiser & Atkinson, 2010). Under it, clear missions and admissions eligibility pools for the three segments of California higher education were outlined; a governing body similar to the UC Board of Regents, the Board of Trustees, was established to oversee the state colleges; and an advisory body, the Coordinating Council for Higher Education, was created to review and coordinate the budgets, degree programs, and expansion of institutions of higher education in California. In addition, the Master Plan reaffirmed California's progressive-era commitment to make higher education affordable and available to all, not only recommending an expansion of the state's existing scholarship program, but also calling for the creation of a new program to provide subsistence grants to scholarship awardees (California Department of Education, 1960). In short, it appeared as though the framers of the Master Plan succeeded in the creation of a plan that not only benefited the tripartite system both collectively and as separate entities, but also provided guidance to the legislature in terms of planned expansion and ensured citizens of California would continue to enjoy open access, tuition-free higher education.

Though well-received by Governor Pat Brown and some lawmakers, the Master Plan was met with some legislative concerns—namely, the creation of an autonomous Board of Trustees for the state college system and the amendment of the state constitution to include the Master Plan—and legislative in-fighting surrounding how much—or how little—of the plan should be acted upon. When all was said and done, Kerr's and Simpson's urging to take the plan as a whole went unheeded and only pieces of the plan were codified. Key legislation surrounding the Master Plan included a constitutional amendment creating the Board of Trustees for the California State Colleges (now California State University, or CSU) and a statute, the Donahoe Higher Education Act of 1960, which created the Coordinating Council of Higher Education, removed the state colleges from the oversight of the State Board of Education, and outlined the differentiated missions of the tripartite system institutions. Interestingly, the recommendations of the Master Plan often touted as its greatest social success—open access to (nearly) tuition-free higher education for all Californians—were not included and have never been sanctioned by law, nor have the admissions eligibility requirements for the UC or the CSU (Douglass, 2000, 2010).

Even though the package-deal plan was dismantled in terms of statutes, its principles led to many deemed successes in the 1960s and 1970s. With clearly defined missions and roles in the tripartite system, higher education as a whole was able to grow and expand expeditiously in California. Mission creep, or the expansion of established institutions' missions to include areas of higher education or degree programs (for example, the baccalaureate at the community college, the doctorate at state universities) not originally included in their mission (Longanecker, 2008; Morphew, 2002), was kept at bay. Clearly defined roles were also established for the legislature, and lawmakers took to funding enrollment, while keeping the costs of such a large system relatively low for taxpayers, rather than attempting to micromanage the state colleges, especially, or self-servingly seeking to establish colleges or universities in their districts (Douglass, 2000; 2010). In short, thanks to the Master Plan and the statutes that stemmed from it, everyone had a job to do and was clear not only on what their job was, but also on what it was not. This division of roles and responsibilities allowed California's system of higher education to grow in the initial decades that followed with few substantial growing pains, all the while keeping access to high-quality higher education open and at a low cost to both students and taxpayers.

## Challenges to Viability

The Master Plan is not without its criticisms, though. When viewed through the lens of neoliberalism—a shift in government priorities from ameliorating inequality, poverty, and social injustice to promoting competition and economic growth (Rhoads, Wagoner, & Ryan, 2009)—the Master Plan, at least in today's context, seems to be less about ensuring a well-functioning tripartite system to support the universal access of California's citizens to higher education and more about perpetuating social stratification. Even with its flaws, the Master Plan proved a success in terms of facilitating the rapid, efficient, planned growth and expansion of higher education in California. The question remains, though, as to whether or not the plan is viable in the California of today. Decreased state funding, increased tuition and fees, eligibility requirements and enrollment caps, and low transfer rates from the community colleges have contributed to limiting access to four-year higher education in California at a time when more students than ever are academically prepared and qualified for admittance to the UC and CSU (Public Policy Institute of California, 2016).

Perhaps, though, we should take a step back and ask first if the plan *should* be viable. If we circle back to where this paper began—with the ideological placement of the Master Plan as an advocate for universal open access to tuition-free (or nearly tuition-free, or at least affordable) higher education—few would argue that the Master Plan, at least in part, should not be held at minimum as an aspiration for which we should strive. Whether functionalist advocates, instrumentalist Marxist critics, or institutionalist critics (Dougherty, 2001), most would agree that a well-educated society is beneficial to *all* and necessary as we move towards more advanced and globalized markets and industries. However, if the Master Plan is to remain even partially feasible or sustainable, those areas or issues that have been identified as contributing to its demise or non-functionality, namely the lack of state fiscal support and the change in the demographics of California and the needs of its citizens (Callan, 2009; Douglass, 2000; 2010; Geiser & Atkinson, 2010; Rhoads et al., 2009), must be addressed.

### *Decreased State Funding*

Through the 1960s and 1970s, California's fiscal commitment to higher education held strong, with all three levels of the tripartite system receiving substantial support to keep tuition for students low or at least modest (Douglass, 2000, 2010). Since then, there has been a general "disinvestment by state and local government in higher education" (Douglass, 2010, p. 13), a phenomena Rhoads et al. (2009) would deem evidence of neoliberalism at work. The passing of Proposition 13 in 1978, which reduced property taxes by more than half and severely limited future tax increases, has had substantial negative consequences on higher education in California, and the State has been forced to become more reliant on those taxes most susceptible to economic downturns—sales and income (Callan, 2009). In the 1970s—when neoliberal governments and policies first began emerging (Davies & Bansel, 2007)—California's investment in higher education accounted for about 25% of the state budget; today—some 40 years into neoliberal policy-making—that amount has fallen to roughly 10% (Public Policy Institute of California, 2016).

*Increased Tuition and Fees*

The answer to the State's disinvestment cannot be to simply raise tuition rates, though. Over the last twenty years, tuition rates at the UC and CSU have more than tripled, and community college tuition rates have increased by almost 40% since 2005 (Public Policy Institute of California, 2016). Although financial assistance is available, tuition increases make higher education unattainable, or perceived as unattainable, for low-income Californians. According to a 2014 study, roughly "86% of Californians see college affordability as a problem" (Public Policy Institute of California, 2016, p. 18). Additionally, rather than allocating funds to those institutions that enroll and serve the majority of California's college-going citizens, the community colleges and CSUs, funds are directed towards the "continued and costly expansion of the University of California" (Callan, 2009, p. 21), an indication of the state's lack of commitment to the higher education for all and ultimately of the success of protecting the UCs fiscal resources through the Master Plan.

*Demographic Changes*

Compounding the problem of the disinvestment in higher education is the exponential population growth and shift in demographics in California. At the time of the Master Plan's inception, California's population was predominantly White (92%); by 2015, the state's population was much more diverse, with Latinos accounting for 38.8% of the State's population; Whites, 38%; Asian/Pacific Islanders, 15.2%; and Blacks, 6.5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). With an increase in underrepresented population, the "higher education pipeline" (Callan, 2009, p. 17) established by the Master Plan does little to serve many of California's citizens. Nearly a decade ago, close to 23% of the State's college-age underrepresented population was enrolled at some level of higher education; however, only 5% were enrolled at four-year institutions (Geiser & Atkinson, 2010). Additionally, nearly half of those students enrolled at a community college are from low-income families, compared to about 25% at the CSU or UC (Public Policy Institute of California, 2016). Given the barriers of poverty and the cumulative inequalities—tracking into vocational or general education, access to information and college advising.of the K-12 system they disproportionately shoulder, it is little wonder under-represented students are faced with attending community college or nothing at all (Callan, 2009; McDonough & Fann, 2007).

*Eligibility Requirements and Enrollment Caps*

Though the eligibility requirements set forth by the Master Plan are not sanctioned by law, they are certainly enforced in practice, with the UC accepting only those from the top 12.5% of students and the CSU, from the top 33% (California Department of Education, 1960). Such eligibility requirements automatically limit access and preclude some students, many of those who are underrepresented and/or from disadvantaged schools and districts, from admittance to the UC and possibly to the CSU. Though the CSU comprises the largest state university in the nation, California ranks 47th in the percentage of students who enroll in four-year institutions (Public Policy Institute of California, 2016). Additionally, the State's diverse student population is not evenly represented across the tripartite system; though student populations at the community colleges and CSUs more or less reflect the demographics of the communities they serve, those at the UC do not, with Latino and African American students in particular being under-represented (Policy Institute of California, 2016).

During lean fiscal times such as recessions, as noted by Callan (2009), it is the broad-access institutions of the CSU and community college system that have suffered enrollment reductions, effectually limiting access to hundreds of thousands of students who are eligible to be admitted. This is particularly troubling as, noted above, it is the CSUs and community colleges that enroll the greatest percentages of California's underrepresented students. According to the Public Policy Institute of California (2016), some 14,000 qualified freshmen applicants were turned away from CSUs in 2013-2014 alone; with enrollment caps remaining and increasing numbers of students who are eligible for admission, that number will likely continue to rise. Because they do not meet the eligibility requirements of the UC and are turned away by the CSU and community college systems due to enrollment caps, many of California's high school graduates are denied the open access to higher education guaranteed them by the Master Plan.

*Low Transfer Rates from Community Colleges to Four-Year Institutions*

Part of what the Master Plan aimed to do, and in fact outlined, was establish clear and easy transfer from the State's community colleges to the UCs and CSUs (California Department of Education, 1960; Callan, 2009; Douglass, 2000; 2010; Geiser & Atkinson, 2010). Though the UCs and CSUs held more stringent eligibility requirements under the Master Plan, which are problematic in and of themselves, students who did not meet these requirements and began at community colleges would be able to transfer to one of these institutions upon completing their general education requirements at the community college. This has yet to be fully realized due to the abysmal transfer rates from the community colleges to the four-year institutions (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Callan, 2009; Dougherty, 2001; Douglass, 2000; 2010; Geiser & Atkinson, 2010; Public Policy Institute of California, 2016). Though it is estimated nearly half of all who enroll in the community college system are transfer-directed or intend to transfer, only 4% do so within two years and 13% within three (Public Policy Institute of California, 2016). Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that enrollment in a community college actually reduces students' likelihood of attaining a baccalaureate degree (Geiser &

Atkinson, 2010; Public Policy Institute of California, 2016). Only a fifth of those who begin in the community college and transfer to a four-year institution succeed in earning their B.A. (Doughtery, 2001).

The community colleges of California, proposed under the Master Plan to be the universal point of entry for those students who do not meet admissions eligibility for the four-year institutions, appear to have become in actuality sieves at best or complete roadblocks at worst. As asserted by Burton Clark (1960), "the conflict between open-door admission and performance of high quality often means a wide discrepancy of entering students and the means of their realization" (p. 571). Thus, rather than acting as the stepping stone they are purported to be under the Master Plan, community colleges serve the purpose of protecting the prestige of the four-year universities, "cooling-out" those students who are less apt to be successful at the UCs or CSUs, thereby limiting social mobility and perpetuating social stratification and hegemony (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Clark, 1960; Callan, 2009; Dougherty, 2001; Douglass, 2000; 2010; Geiser & Atkinson, 2010). This is especially troubling given the California Community Colleges enroll the bulk of California's high school graduates, in general, and underrepresented students, in particular, who seek higher education (Public Policy Institute of California, 2016).

## Conclusion

The Master Plan for Higher Education in California is held nationally and internationally as one of the most successful models for higher education. Promising low or no tuition and universal access to higher education for all high school graduates, it embodies the egalitarian ideals of the Progressive Era, and its differentiation of mission and clear roles and responsibilities in the absence of a statewide higher education coordinating body undoubtedly helped propel California forward in terms of expansive, high-quality higher education. In more recent decades, though, the presumed ideal of the Master Plan has not only faltered but perhaps failed entirely. With decreased state funding, increased tuition and fees, stratified admission eligibility requirements, caps on enrollment, and low transfer rates from the community colleges to four-year institutions, California has fallen from being at the top of the nation's degree-awarding states to ranking near the bottom (Douglass, 2000; Callan, 2009; Geiser & Atkinson, 2010; Public Policy Institute of California, 2016). Rather than being used to promote access and opportunity, it seems as though the tenets of the Master Plan are now being used to limit and avert access via eligibility requirements coupled with enrollment caps.

Through this, the UC has escaped relatively unscathed, enjoying comparatively stable funding, few caps on enrollment, and continued access to only the highest-performing, most elite high school graduates. Given this, it appears as though Clark Kerr's push to solidify the UC's position at the top of the tripartite system succeeded. Unfortunately, it has arguably been at the expense of Californians, especially under-represented Californians, who wish to pursue postsecondary degrees. This effect may be mitigated if: 1) eligibility policies were relaxed or expanded; 2) enrollments at broad-access institutions were not sacrificed by the legislature during times of economic downturn; and/or 3) a more efficient and effective pathway for transfer from the community college to a four-year institution were instated; in doing so, students, especially under-represented students, might actually begin to equitably access—*fully* access—the egalitarian and democratizing higher education utopia supposedly created by the Master Plan.

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