

Attention Must Be Paid

The Conditions for Admission: Access, Equity, and the Social Contract of Public Universities

by John Aubrey Douglass

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REVIEWED BY: MARK F. SMITH

In *The Conditions for Admission: Access, Equity, and the Social Contract of Public Universities*, John Aubrey Douglass uses the admissions process in higher education as a window on the changing mission of public higher education. Douglass, a senior research fellow for public policy and higher education at the Center for Studies in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley, combines an historical overview of California's higher education system with a policy analysis of admissions procedures to make an effective case that the mission of public higher education has changed, is continuing to change, and requires policymakers and academics to take steps to manage that change.

In choosing California as his focal point, Douglass draws on his own earlier work (*The California Idea and American Higher Education*, Stanford University Press, 2000), and for the most part the choice works well. California's Master Plan for Higher Education has given coherence to the state's complex yet well-organized higher education system. But the book would have benefited from a more thorough integration of the California State University System and the community colleges into the discussion. The book relies too heavily on the role of the University of California in making its points.

Douglass outlines the origins of the public universities before turning to the

Mark F. Smith has been an organizational specialist in higher education for the National Education Association since March 2006. He helps coordinate NEA's higher education program, working with state affiliates and locals to advance the interests of college and university faculty and staff. He holds a BA in History and Political Science from the University of Wisconsin and an MA in Government from Johns Hopkins University. Prior to joining NEA, he served as director of government relations for the American Association of University Professors.

narrative core of the book: the battle over affirmative action in admissions in the 1990s. From the beginning of its history, the University of California exemplified the tensions of the public university—to serve the needs of the states and open the doors of higher education to all, while at the same time providing academically excellent programs. In addition, public universities were to “help build a state system of public education, stretching from the local primary school to the university, and thereby fundamentally reshape social and economic opportunity.”

On the one hand, Daniel Coit Gilman, the University of California’s second president, defined the purpose of the university as an institution intended “for the promotion and diffusion of knowledge.” On the other, the University of Wisconsin’s Charles Van Hise argued in 1910 that the public university was the “soul of the state.” Van Hise added that “the state owns the university; and every citizen feels himself to be a stockholder in that ownership.” This tension between the needs of the state and the needs of the academy defines much of the history of American higher education.

The population explosion following World War II led to a huge expansion of higher education in California, and the adoption of the historic Master Plan. Douglass gives a more nuanced picture of the plan’s adoption than the conventional version that gives almost all the credit to Clark Kerr. For yet another view, see the relevant chapter in Ethan Rarick’s biography of Governor Pat Brown, which takes a more narrowly political approach. (Ethan Rarick, *California Rising: The Life and Times of Pat Brown*. University of California Press. 2006.)

At the heart of Douglass’s narrative is the growing affirmative action debate over admissions in the University of California system. Douglass makes clear that the demographic changes accompanying population growth, combined with the political climate in the mid 1990s, led to the abolishment of affirmative action in 1995. The growth in minority populations, coupled with an ever-increasing selectiveness—especially at the prestige campuses at Berkeley and UCLA—would have led to a showdown no matter what the political circumstances were. However, Governor Pete Wilson’s presidential ambitions in 1996, and the actions of Wilson ally, affirmative action opponent, and member of the University of California Board of Regents Ward Connerly caused the 1995 battle on the Board of Regents and the related referendum vote on Proposition 209, which prohibited affirmative action in state institutions.

Douglass makes clear that this debate centered on the most selective campuses, Berkeley and UCLA, which, while they together admitted 55,000 students, only comprised 3 percent of California’s higher education enrollment. He also clarifies a point that often got lost in the debate—individuals first had to cross the UC-eligible threshold to qualify for affirmative action consideration and gain enrollment at any of the campuses in the system. The charge that unqualified members of one ethnic group were gaining admission over qualified members of another ethnic group was not an accurate picture of the situation. Nevertheless, in

California as elsewhere, as states attempted to increase the selectivity of their admissions process to improve their academic prestige—while at the same time providing unlimited access to state students—such conflicts became inevitable. California’s size and demographic circumstances determined that it play the lead role in the conflict.

In the closing section of the book, Douglass attempts to assess the “contemporary vitality of social contract.” He focuses on four issues:

- appropriate level of autonomy that public universities should have for setting admissions policies;
- how merit is defined and used in the process of selecting among qualified students;
- the crisis of the publics—the significant decline in public funding for higher education relative to costs;
- the relatively new interest by selective public universities in privatization.

Together, these four issues will determine the conditions of public higher education in the nation for some time to come. Douglass is not optimistic that the challenges he lays out will be met. Certainly, as he notes, there is a growing realization that access and affordability have become a big political issue, although the book was written before significant steps were taken by Congress to begin to address the situation. NEA is pushing the issues of access and affordability strongly in the 2008 election and next year’s Congress to build on those first steps. We cannot continue to underfund public universities and expect them to respond to all of the conflicting demands we place on them. In order to maintain the promise of public higher education, attention will need to be paid by legislators and policymakers at all levels of government. This impressive book lays out some of that challenge. [nea](#)

