

Last out, turn off the lights

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Toby Miller watches helplessly as the once-proud University of California system crumbles to its knees.

The phones are being turned off. The garbage is no longer being removed from offices. Student fees are rumoured to be going up by 35 per cent. Faculty salaries have been slashed by 4 to 10 per cent. The entire place will be closed from mid-December for weeks. Dozens of chairs at the University of California, San Diego have signed a document proposing the entire closure of three smaller UC campuses because we're not really research universities and we cost money that could otherwise be allocated to the flagships of the UC system.

That's life at UC Riverside just now. A superb executive vice-chancellor/provost has resigned because she won't administer these brutalities. Meanwhile, managerial homilies emanate from senior management in regular "letters" to the "community" using clichés of the kind I generated as a speech-writer to boring bureaucrats and businessmen in the mid-1980s, like "Doing more with less", "The Riverside opportunity," and assorted inanities. Are people truly still paid to do this, and are there any readers out there who are seduced by them?

My own department has seen the other senior professors leave; a high-quality junior faculty member denied tenure; and rejections of incremental advancement for other deserving faculty.

It's a very tough time in what used to be the jewel of public higher education. As the flotilla sinks, people flee to safety. Faculty are looking around, and other schools are looking at them. The University of Texas system is rumoured to be using a massive fund to hire talent.

The University of Southern California, an immensely rich private school here in LA, has lost \$1 billion in the value of its endowment since 2008, but is still much better off than a decade ago. This is a special opportunity for it to raid UC for the best scientists in the world (the cost of good science is always a problem for private universities to meet, due to the high initial costs and ongoing refurbishment of equipment).

The question is how bad the long-term impact will be: whether counter-cyclical policies to retain key faculty will work if this is not a dip in the Cali economy but its demise, at least in terms of transfers to public service from the private sector. Put another way, even if the state had the wisdom to sustain the UC through the crisis until tax receipts picked up once more, would there be any point if the crisis in fact has no end point but is rather a brutal transformation that shrinks the public sector irrevocably, thereby finalising the longstanding wish of the Republican Party to "starve the beast" (the "beast" being the population, understood as those receiving the support of tax-funded programs)?

You can't blame students for looking on aghast and hoping it just gets better. Or taking direct action such as occupying dean's offices. You can't blame the professoriate for being struck dumb and hurting but doing nothing collectively, or organising vigorously and criticising all levels above them. You can't blame the staff for refusing to accept furloughs thanks to union opposition, or wishing the union would let them do so and thereby protect their jobs. It's a wildly contradictory time, when all of the above is happening.

That wildness of US capitalism is nowhere more fully experienced than in the west coast of the country, where crazy asset inflation was the root of the global financial crisis. Depending on which evaluation you

look at, my loft is worth between \$70,000 and \$300,000 less than a year ago. My street (in a beach suburb of Los Angeles, not in the harder-hit Inland Empire, where Riverside is located, 100 kilometres due east) is littered with fancy residential buildings that lie empty even as homeless folks cluster by street lights holding banners inviting drivers to help them “stay drunk.”

So unlike your other foreign correspondents, I’m telling a story of doom and gloom just now, as the adventure of a system built with such hope just 50 years ago, that quickly produced dozens of Nobel laureates, pioneering novelists, ethnic studies innovations, Marxist feminist enclaves, and medical schools the envy of the world, comes to a shattering end.

To be here now is to be present at a turning point in educational history, when pages are torn from a playbook and lives are torn asunder. Dedicated scholars who had made the decision to join the ranks of the gentry poor rather than follow mammon find that the supposed trade-off - you can pursue your research secure in the knowledge that your basic welfare is secure - no longer applies. It’s a meltdown.

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