

The University Besieged

by Jeff Lustig

The American university today is a battered figure on the public domain, half-relic of the past, half-orphan of the present, celebrated on the dais while denigrated in the boardroom and starved by state legislatures. Administrators say our campuses can't survive if they are constantly challenged from within. Many students and faculty believe they won't survive if they're not.

The university is in crisis.

The future hangs in the balance.

This is where I came in.

It's where I came in in my own college career and how things also looked from within the Free Speech Movement (FSM) and educational reform movements at the University of California, Berkeley in the early 1960s, as the nation's former land grant universities morphed into corporate grant universities, and UC President Clark Kerr celebrated the convergence of the university and industry. Those were years of conflict, of charge and counter-charge, committees and counter-committees, bulletins from above and pronouncements from below. "Bliss... it was to be alive," in William Blake' lyric; "But to be young was very heaven."

THE CLASSROOM AND THE PLAZA

I received my degrees from Berkeley in those years, my B.A., my M.A., and my Ph.D. And three other distinctions too: my arrests in the FSM, the Third

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World Strike, and People's Park. Acquiring each of those honors taught me a lot. And now looking back—having gone from being a Young Turk into being an Old Fart—I see what a special education it was, and how much it was a product of the two realms: the classroom and the plaza. (I include in the “plaza,” a number of places, both on and off campus, including Sproul Plaza in Berkeley, meeting venues, demonstrations, ad hoc panels, and public debates.) I realize now how much I am indebted to both realms and to the American university itself, in all its contradictions, for what I study and care about, and who I am today.

In the plaza (in the extended sense) I learned not only about politics—how to think politically and speak publicly. I also learned about more academic things, including intellectual topics and subjects outside the curriculum of the classrooms.

One of those topics was the university itself—its historic purposes and contested character, and it is the topic I will address here. And yes, it was in the plaza that this subject first came up for me, not the classroom. It came up there partly because of the protests we were engaged in, and partly because Kerr's just-published *Uses of the University* made a number of claims about the institution that were widely celebrated—though not by students on the campuses of the country. My understanding of the university was extended in evening colloquia and panels with campus faculty. There were no formal courses about the institution despite its long and rich history and despite it being the place we were all gathered, working together. Classrooms still neglect the topic, I think, today. Those arguments in the plaza and presentations on the panels were the first places I heard about the origins of the university in 12th century Bologna and Paris, about things like the liberal arts and academic freedom, of names like Cardinal Newman, Robert Hutchins, and James B. Conant, or of the fact that the Puritans established Harvard, the nation's first higher education institution as early as 1636.



The author, during the Free Speech Movement.

In the years since, I've spent a good deal of time in various struggles and dissenting efforts, in union activities, writing leaflets and newsletters, and helping organize votes of no-confidence. All this has been the expression and outgrowth of ideas about the university I'd come, as a result of my education (in classroom and plaza), to take seriously. I'll discuss some of those ideas because the university which embodies them is an embattled figure in the public domain, besieged not just by state disinvestment in higher education but by institutional trends and theories within the universities themselves. These trends and theories have presented us with difficult predicaments and pose a danger, I propose, for the larger society.

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DEFINING THE UNIVERSITY

What, then, is a university? It's been a lot of things over the centuries. But three of its aspects or roles have struck me as particularly important over the last few years: (1) its role with the liberal arts, (2) its political role, and (3) its character as a community.

A commitment to the liberal arts has been distinctive of the university since its origins. In fact, Cardinal Newman, in his great book, *The Idea of the University*, referred to "a University or Liberal Education" as one and the same thing.¹ That hasn't meant that everyone had to be a history or English major; but it has meant that students are exposed to humanities courses and ways of thinking while at college, and that the spirit of the liberal arts—creative, critical, and contextualizing—has extended to even the teaching of things like engineering, the sciences, and—though it may be a stretch—business administration. (For the Greeks, the study of business was actually one of the menial not the liberal arts).

The Greeks and Romans saw the liberal arts as those skills that were necessary to make a person free. Traditionally, there were seven of them; though each era has argued about what those seven were. Science and history were added in the 19th century, and the social sciences, for many, in the 20th.² But these arts were not exactly the same as our disciplines. They were different ways of thinking about and attending to the world, different sensibilities that needed to be developed in students if they were to become fully developed people—or, again, free.

The idea is clarified by a remark of Chiura Obata's, the wonderful Japanese painter, who, in the 1930s taught at Berkeley, and was later interned in Topaz, Utah. In a book Obata wrote about the internment, he says he was hired at UC to teach art, but first had to "teach my students beauty. No one should pass through

four years of college without [being] given the knowledge of beauty, and the eyes with which to see it.”³ That comment about the necessity of knowing beauty and being given the eyes with which to see it is about as good a statement of one aspect of the liberal arts approach as you’ll find.

So the liberal arts aren’t bodies of knowledge that can be ladled out. They can’t be set down on a study sheet (though developing them requires the mastery of specific bodies of knowledge). They are abilities, like the ability to see beauty or do critical inquiry, and are cultivated or brought out of (e-duced from) students’ latent powers. In this sense, a university helps students develop their powers, helps them to

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develop “lives of rich significance.”⁵ How it does this, like any cultivation, is a little mysterious and may take years to bear fruit. I’m reminded of Thomas Carlyle: “When the oak-tree [falls] the whole forest echoes with it; but a hundred seeds are planted silently by some unnoticed breeze.” We faculty are in this seed wafting business, the silent breeze business. (Which is not the same as the hot air business.) And the fruit of such cultivation when we’re successful, C. Wright Mills noted in his writings on education, “is the self-educating, self-cultivating man or woman.”⁵

A lot more could be said about this topic, but I’ll end by observing that this liberal arts culture sets the university off from the rest of the society. Preserving it requires a certain autonomy from that society. It makes the campus a special place. How special became clear to me 10 years ago when I was helping organize the California Faculty Association’s public hearings around the state about the future of the university. Some alumni of California State University (CSU) campuses spoke at those hearings, and a few referred to the campus they’d once attended as having seemed to them like a “temple,” a “treasure,” or sanctuary. A community organizer from South Central in Los Angeles said that CSU LA for him had been an “oasis.” A few months ago in a *Sacramento Bee* op-ed, a CSU Fresno professor made the same point, calling the university campus “an island of difference,” threatened, he said, by a “rising sea of technologically facilitated sameness.”⁶ Campus values are different from the rest of society’s. So its methods and social relations are different too.

The liberal arts could not be jettisoned from the university and its autonomy lost without changing what the institution fundamentally is. And minorities and the poor who gained access to a university but no longer found their sensibilities expanded and their horizons widened by those arts would still be denied a genuine higher education.

A second fundamental purpose of public higher education in America has been political. The classical thinkers on republics and democracies never thought those systems could exist without educated citizens. In America, public universities and colleges were seen as places to train those citizens and prepare them for their democratic roles.

I first heard this point made in the plaza. One day a critic of what we activists were doing took the podium and declared that parents sent their kids to college to study, not to do politics. An older student, maybe a grad student, responded, saying that a public education was not just an education funded by the public, but an

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education that prepared students to be parts of a public—to be citizens. His point was that what we were learning in the plaza was a proper part of the curriculum, indeed a core responsibility of the curriculum.

He was, I later found, on solid footing. People like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin believed that a key purpose of higher education was to help in the formation of a self-governing people.⁷ In this civic humanist branch of the tradition, a main goal of liberal arts education was the achievement of civic or public freedom. That tradition had many adherents in the 19th century United States. During the arguments over setting up the College of California (which later became UC Berkeley) in the 1860s, the Reverend Horatio Stebbins urged that a state university was pivotal “to free Republican government.” He argued that “If the state [i.e., the larger political order] imposes duties that require intelligence, it is the office of the state to furnish the means of intelligence....[I]t is for the dignity of the commonwealth.”⁸ That was why higher education was made tuition-free in California back in 1868.

Article 9 of the California constitution of 1879, the state’s current constitution, says: “A general diffusion of knowledge and intelligence being essential to the rights and liberties of the people, the Legislature shall encourage by all suitable means the promotion of intellectual, scientific [etc.]...improvement.” It doesn’t say the legislature should do this for career training, or to boost the state’s GDP. It shall do this because it’s “essential to the rights and liberties of the people.”

As late as 1939, the state’s Department of Education identified a main task of the state college system as the “democratization” of higher education. “The state colleges more than any other group of institutions in California,” it said, “face the task of interpreting democracy to the society.”⁹ No wonder the CSU has been called the People’s University.





C. Wright Mills summarized this larger point in the 1950s by saying that, “the prime task of public education, as it came widely to be understood in this country, was politics: to make the citizen more knowledgeable and thus better able to think and judge of public affairs.”¹⁰

The idea here was not that the political task was supposed to be fulfilled entirely in the classroom. (And the idea was not to politicize the classroom, something I, like most people, object to, having been subjected to it by a few conservative professors in my early years.) Rather, it is a task that’s also begun to be fulfilled over the last half-century in plazas, courtyards, impromptu seminars, and

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current-affairs panels in the nation’s campuses—in their expanding public spheres.

“Public schools,” as Benjamin Barber puts it, “are not merely schools for the public, ...but schools of publicness; institutions where we learn what it means to *be* a public....”¹¹ Participation in a public sphere enables students to develop the qualities of mind that help them locate themselves in history and society, help them learn about other histories and societies, and also help prepare them to act to make ours a more just society.

Sproul Plaza was not, then, unique to Berkeley. It represented a function that is now being developed at most colleges and universities. The campus may be, in fact, one of the last training grounds left in the society for teaching students about real public life. The political theorist Martha Nussbaum even suggests that, “one way of assessing any educational scheme is to ask how well it prepares young people for life” in a political system in which “the people inform themselves about crucial issues they will address as voters” and their choices will have an “impact on the lives of people who differ from themselves.”¹²

This idea of the university’s larger political role is not just that of a few maverick thinkers. Immanuel Kant acknowledged the university both as a place for learning the liberal arts and for citizenship. “The university [must] contain a faculty that,” he wrote, “... [are] free to evaluate everything, [a faculty that] concerns itself with ... truth: one in which reason is authorized to speak out publicly.”¹³ And a few years ago, Toni Morrison, the Nobel Prize-winning author, in explaining that her teaching was necessarily value-laden, urged that the university needs to “take seriously and rigorously its roles as guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of ... complex ethical problems, [and] as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices.”¹⁴

The American university, then, is a place that, by instructing students, supporting its faculty's teaching and research, and creating lively public spaces, seeks to preserve a democratic politics and provide means for the society to reflect on its past and its possible futures.

A third aspect of the university I've thought about in recent years is its historic character as a community. That dates from the medieval idea of a university as "a community of masters and scholars." Paul Goodman noted in 1963 that it was the last self-governing community in the United States. This community's form of self-governance is unique. It is a shared governance, with the faculty responsible

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for curriculum and academics, and the administration, for the business and operations parts of the campus. But it is, optimally, a community of which we are all members, not a bureaucracy or a business firm.

The University is a community not simply by historical accident but by functional necessity. You need a community if students (traditionally regarded as apprentices) in different fields and professions are going to be trained in the practices and standards of all those fields and professions. You need a community to maintain academic freedom, which was created originally by faculty self-governance (not, for example, by the Bill of Rights). And you need a community to maintain what I'll call the knowledge commons, around which the university was historically built. The knowledge commons is a place in which the cultural and intellectual wealth of the past is made available, where ideas are freely shared and where ideas also grow by cross-fertilization from many fields.

A commons also entails aspects of a gift economy, like that of the northwest Indian tribes, notably the Kwakiutl—a place knit together by gifts rather than sales, where the highest status goes to those who give the most, and the exchange of gifts enriches the bonds of the community at the same time it provides individuals with stimulation and support. Elements of that kind of economy were still evident in the places I've spent my career. Looking back on it, the best things in that career have been gifts—the existence of state universities in the first place, the fact that at the one I attended, Loyalty Oath resisters back in 1949 and 1950 took a stand, many losing their jobs by the act but also providing a courageous example, and a reminder of principle, for our later Free Speech Movement. The professors I serendipitously found, the colleagues whose insights sparked new ideas, the collegiality of my department at CSU Sacramento, have all been gifts—gifts I cannot deny, but I can try to repay.

THE UNIVERSITY BESIEGED

Today, we know, the university defined by these characteristics is besieged—not just from without, but by theories and organizational redesigns promoted within. These theories and models are taken over largely from the world of business, specifically the asset-stripping, CEO-enriching stage of business in which we find ourselves. In post-War America, capital began to seek its profits by commodifying activities in worlds that had previously lain outside the marketplace: hospitals and medical care, the arts, political campaigns. And we too have become objects of its affection. Parts of the university do have to be run like a business

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(facilities maintenance, for example, and food services). But the university as a whole is not a business, and what is exchanged in its classes and seminar rooms are not commodities. Confusion on these scores threatens the fulfillment of all three objectives mentioned above.

Seeing the university in business terms, first and foremost, sidelines the liberal arts and reduces support for the humanities compared, say, to engineering and business administration. It was never the aim of the liberal arts to raise lifetime incomes.¹⁵ But the preface to *What Business Wants from Higher Education*, published by the American Council on Education, tells us that, “[H]igher education must stand ready to measure institutional performance in terms of the demonstrated learning of our students, particularly in the areas deemed relevant by prospective employers.”¹⁶

Second, this view of our tasks marginalizes public life and the training of citizens because it is not “relevant to prospective employers.” The new view prefers stage-managed meetings to real public discourse when explanations are required.

And third, the new model tries to supplant the roles and relationships of a community by those of the corporation, calling department chairs “managers,” departments “profit centers,” and students “customers.” Even the word “university” has been dropped from public references to the institution where I work (California State University, Sacramento) in favor of a brand name (“Sac State”) formerly seen mainly on sweatshirts. And where the commercially oriented used to see the campus serving the economy indirectly, by training its workforce, they now see it as a direct site of capital accumulation, with consumer malls, commodified courseware, licensing agreements, and captive markets for information technology systems.

In a community genuinely dedicated, as a community, to higher education, no

manager would accept tens of thousands of dollars of salary increases while the real salaries of those who fulfilled its core mission were being cut. No non-classroom building would be built or auxiliary activities, like athletic programs, maintained undiminished when students had to pay drastically hiked fees (15.5 percent now on top of a 32 percent increase last year—amounting to more than three times the fees students paid in 2000.)¹⁷ If it is claimed that the funds for classroom buildings and auxiliary expenditures come out of different accounts, I'd reply that managers who've shown the ingenuity many do in moving money around—coming up in the CSU, for example, with a half-billion dollars internally to pay for new manage-

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ment software—could surely find a way to stanch student fee increases or boost faculty salaries if they had a mind to.

If our managers retained an allegiance to the universities' real character and purposes, even the current budget cuts might have been weathered without a loss of morale and a decline in educational quality. Without that allegiance, even a restoration of previous funding levels will not rebuild the institution.

We see the signs of the attempted redefinition of the university all around us—in the construction for example, of extraneous building that improve appearances while neglecting our core purposes. Or in requirements to forecast demonstrated outcomes, as if the fruit of silently planted seeds could be added-up ahead of time and harvested tomorrow, and the Groves of Academe estimated as so many board feet of lumber.

We hear the sounds of the attempted shift as new economic terms displace the older educational vocabulary. But students are not customers. And claiming that they are proposes a drastic narrowing of the existing obligations between teachers and them. A salesman sells an item to a customer and the relationship ends. Nothing more is required; and no buyer should expect more. There is no care for the customer's arts and powers. Nor any commitment on the customer's part to master a craft or subject matter, and perhaps be changed in the process. The new term make strangers of people who formerly required mutual trust.

We faculty have also found ourselves mislabeled by this effort, as when we receive "customer surveys" about campus services. I have filed these surveys in the circular file, and hope you will too. Because they are misaddressed. And they are sent by people who don't know where they are. I am not and never have been a customer on this campus. I've been a member of a community, a co-worker in a grand and difficult effort.

Ultimately this new model also has an organizational thrust that would restructure the university. From a business perspective, sharing governance with employees is a recipe for disaster. The long-term bias of the model is therefore to sideline that sharing and reduce the faculty to the status of employees. The new managers would just as soon get rid of academic customs like shared governance, academic autonomy, and, of course, tenure.¹⁸ When CSU Chancellor Reed arrived in 1998, fresh from launching Gulf Coast University in Florida (a campus without tenure) and announced “faculty culture must change,” that’s what he was talking about.

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Those who promote a business model of higher education, finally, would wipe out the university’s autonomy and its character as a “sanctuary” or “island of difference” to make it just the same as the rest of the society. Students coming to study here would no longer have the option of experiencing a different culture with deeper values than consumer culture. And that’s perhaps the real tragedy of the proposed shift: that the vision of human nature implicitly transmitted by the campus would no longer be of a nature with depths and facets that need to be developed, but of one driven simply by desires to be quickly met—and an education gained—by the constant purchase of gadgets, online gear, and even lifestyles. You are what you buy. The freedom provided by this vision is the manipulated freedom of the consumer who knows nothing about the options missing from the array of items stocked on the shelves.

There is a politics to this attempted reorganization of the university, but it is not a politics that introduces itself openly in the public space and is eager to argue its case. Rather, it is part of the politics of privatization that has narrowed and degraded California’s public life for the past 30 years. This is the politics that has given our state such things as the lowest adult literacy rate of any state in the nation, reversed much of the progress we’d made toward racial and ethnic equality, and increased class polarization. The privatized university feeds these trends and does nothing to stanch them. It reconceives higher education as no longer a public good paid for by the public but as dependent on family savings (or private wealth); no longer undertaken for Horatio Stebbins’ “dignity of the commonwealth” but for private careers; and no longer occurring within a community but simply at a point of intersecting private itineraries.

If this effort to remake the university is successful, we’ll also see the knowledge commons enclosed and privatized by patent laws, licensing agreements, and rising tuition. You’ll need cash to get to our common patrimony.

FACULTY MUST DRAW THE LINE

This explains the flare-ups and conflicts on the nation's campuses over the last few years. They are products of the clash between two different visions of higher education and its functions—the older vision that combined personal, political, and professional purposes, and the new, which comes down to a service station model of higher education. It was the first signs of the new mindset and model, I now see, that we ran up against on one campus in the '60s.¹⁹ Today the attempt to impose that model engulfs American academia as a whole.

The contested nature of the current campus poses difficult problems for us

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that defy pat answers or easy remedies: How do we respond to what are ultimately political threats with a public, rather than an acrimonious, politics, and revive a constructive interplay between the classroom and the plaza? How do we sustain a university-level education in classrooms that are poorly maintained and have twice the number of students (and half the tenured teachers) they should have? How can we remain loyal supporters of our campus, when it puts more emphasis on an expensive gym than on its teaching mission, mixes private and public funds in its foundation accounts, and adds expensive administrators while cutting classes? How can we confidently participate in shared governance when many academic and curricular decisions, which are part of the faculty's domain, are pre-empted by administrative fiscal decisions?

These are problems for which we lack clear-cut answers. We've each had to deal with them in our own way. But in responding to them we cannot avoid upholding one model of the university or the other. Even by doing nothing. "By our silence," Camus reminded us, "we also take a stand." I hope the stand will be against this new business and corporate model of education.

If it is not, we will help to work a profound inversion in the functions of the American university. Instead of providing a means for society to appraise its activities in light of larger historical and moral contexts, it will become a means only of glorifying the status quo and of propagandizing students about its beliefs. Instead of offering a means for students to find their own best powers, it will become a tool to guide them into pre-cut occupational slots. And instead of creating conscious citizens the university will produce compliant subjects.


But if it is to be contested, who is to do it? Who will bell the cat? Not the administrators, who nearly all promote the business model. Hopefully the students, while they're here. And the staff. But, I want to suggest, centrally this is a job for the faculty.

Ted Hornback, one of CSU Sacramento's great gadflies, called them "the core of the university" and stated, "Faculty, as the core of the university, have an obligation to the future."²⁰ This new model has to be contested to fulfill that obligation, and as part of a larger struggle to restore many public goods in this state. Over the long term, there is no one else but the faculty to do it. And we must attempt to do this off-campus as well as on. As public educators we have to reeducate the larger public about the purposes of higher education, and the costs of disinvestment in it. We have to reawaken the state's historic commitment to it.

This will be hard because over the last generation we've seen business roundtables, education administrators, and rump parliaments of term-limited legislators take charge of the discussion by recommending such things as distance learning, "reinvention," the need for "demonstrated outcomes," and in the CSU system the ludicrous "deliverology," while we have remained indecisive about our public role and mostly silent. This silence needs to end. We need to become activist professionals, or we will cease to be professionals at all.

Jack Livingston would agree. Back in 1976, in the midst of other troubles, he wrote a campus version of the Declaration of Independence in which he declared it "the right and duty of its faculty to... to [restore] the conditions [necessary] to the life of the mind and the education of a free citizenry."²¹ He and others, created a Committee to Support Higher Education, and went out to clubs and churches and meetings with legislators to explain what was going on in the state universities, and what should be going on.

If we don't believe students are customers, don't see the university as just a brand but as a living community, and don't support the privatization of the People's University, then we're going to have to renew their effort—not to escape our job in the classroom but to properly fulfill it.

If we mean to preserve the special character of campus culture, to preserve the campus as a gateway of opportunity rather than a bastion of class privilege, and to preserve for future students the gift our predecessors gave us, then we'll have to join the fray over higher education. The public university is indeed a treasure, the repository of historic hopes and unfinished struggles, which is why it claims our allegiance and further efforts. 

ENDNOTES

1. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 105.
2. The seven classic liberal arts were: grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (by which they meant something different from what we do today).
3. Kimi K. Hill, *Topaz Moon, Chiura Obata's Art of the Internment*, 7.
4. Martha Nussbaum, "The liberal arts are not elitist," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Mar. 5, 2010, A88.
5. C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*, 318.
6. Howard V. Hendrix, "Universities shouldn't blindly enlist in the digital revolution," *Sacramento Bee*, Sept. 7, 2010, A13.

7. Jefferson wrote Madison in 1787, "The only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty is to educate and inform the whole mass of the people." Benjamin Barber, *An Aristocracy of Everyone: The Politics of Education and Future of America*, 224.
8. John A. Douglass, *The California Idea and American Higher Education*, 44, 31.
9. *Ibid*, 159.
10. C. Wright Mills, *op. cit.*
11. "Education for Democracy," *The Good Society: A PEGS Journal*, VII (2), Spring 1997, 1, 4. The point is "not that the university has a civic mission, but that the university is a civic mission..." Barber, *Aristocracy of Everyone*, 14, 222. Also see Henry Giroux, "Neoliberalism, Corporate Culture, and the Promise of Higher Education: The University as a Democratic Public Sphere," *Harvard Educational Review*, 72, (4), Winter 2002.
12. Nussbaum, "The Liberal Arts Are Not Elitist."
13. Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 27-29; Newman, 177.
14. Toni Morrison, "How Can Values Be Taught in This University," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Spring 2001, 278.
15. Felicia Ackerman, "Letter to Editor," *New York Times*, Aug. 21, 2010, A16.
16. D. Oblinger and A-L Verville, *What Business Wants from Higher Education*, vii.
17. Since this talk was delivered, CSU trustees have raised tuition by a staggering 23 percent, making it \$6,400 a year, twice what it was in 2007.
18. The authors claim explicitly that "the autonomous culture of higher education" is an atavism, 82.
19. Though an original proponent of the new model, Clark Kerr by the 1995 edition of his book acknowledged that there was "more to a university" than what sells in the market. Where he previously overlooked the need for autonomy, he now erected it into one of the criteria of a healthy university. *Uses of the University*, 4th ed., 182; 192-193.
20. Vernon Hornback, "Letter to the CSUS Academic Senate," Jan. 21, 1997. He followed this by saying, "It has been their duty and honor over the centuries to awaken the minds of the nation's youth, to help them acquire the knowledge and understanding, the questioning and questing habit of mind that marks the critically involved citizen and the educated man and woman."
21. Harry Aron, John Livingston, Marc Tool, "Faculty Declaration of Intent," CSU Sacramento, Mar. 10, 1976. 1.

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About the photographs: The photo of Jeff Lustig, circa 1964, was provided by David Lance Goines, author of *The Free Speech Movement: Coming of Age in the 1960s*. Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, California, 1993. "Protesters marching through the Sather Gates toward the Regents Meeting, November 20," is courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.