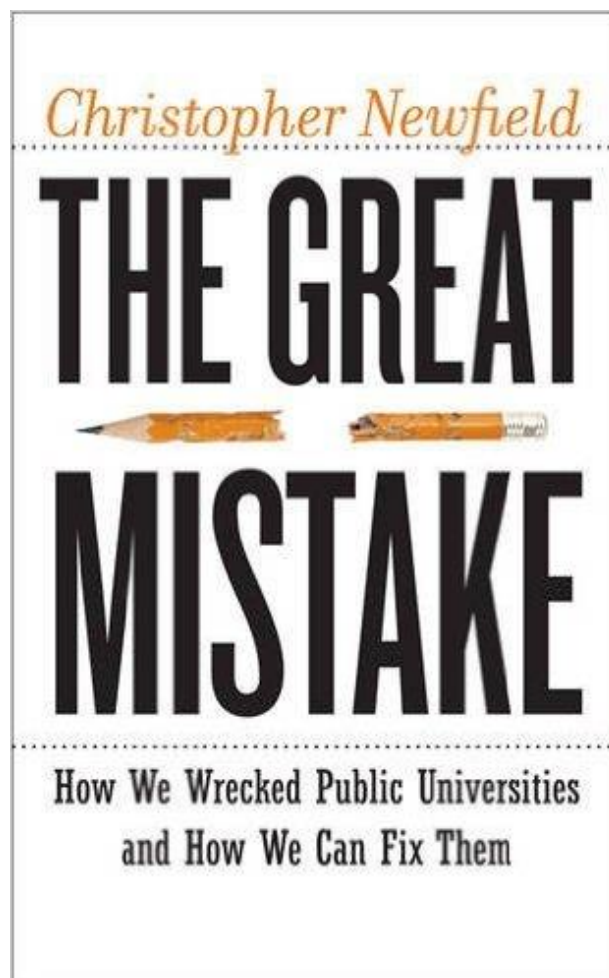


RADICAL TEACHER

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Review
The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public
Universities and How We Can Fix Them
By Christopher Newfield

Reviewed by Sarah E. Chinn



The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them by Christopher Newfield (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016)

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Over the past few years there has been something of a cottage industry in analyzing higher education's woes and trying to find solutions for them. Some have been in the "kids today/get off my lawn" camp (most notably Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's grumpy *Academically Adrift*); others have embraced a self-help, albeit politically aware, vibe (I'm thinking here of Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber's *The Slow Professor*); some have simply drunk the neoliberal Kool-Ade (Gregory Colón Semenza's *Graduate Study for the Twenty-First Century* is a prime example of Jeff Bezos's famous-yet-terrifying boast that "new economy" employees have to work fast, smart, and hard all at once). But only a few of these books have engaged in a thoroughgoing analysis of trends in higher education, especially public higher education, that takes a long, historicized look at where we are, how we got there, and what we can do to change the situation.

Christopher Newfield's *The Great Mistake* is one of those books. A sort of companion piece to Steven Brier and Michael Fabricant's *Austerity Blues*, as well as a sequel to Newfield's own 2008 study, *Unmaking the Public University*, *The Great Mistake* is a systematic, deeply researched, and clearly written analysis of why public universities have experienced a drop in state investment, student skill levels, and public respect. And although it may seem daunting to read 350 pages of budget analysis, policy critiques, and bar graphs, Newfield whisks his readers through a compelling, if wonkish, investigation of how privatization, corporatization, and student debt have hacked away at the foundations of what used to be thought of as a public good.

The Great Mistake effectively challenges some of the assumptions even those of us who champion public higher education believe. For example, he convincingly proves that state disinvestment is more the result of tuition hikes than the other way around, and that foundation and government funding for STEM fields actually drains money from university coffers to cover all kinds of indirect costs.

While Newfield mentions the glory days of the post-GI bill expansion of public higher education, he doesn't dwell there long, not least because he's aware of how access was parceled out depending on students' race and gender. His

focus is on the post-Reagan era (although he traces its roots even further back), the rise of bringing "market solutions" to social services, and the steady – and more recently, precipitous – disinvestment by state legislatures and governors in the colleges and universities they fund. And he makes a bold claim: "Private sector 'reforms' are not the cure for the college cost disease – they *are* the college cost disease" (4).

To my mind, this is the most striking part of his argument. Critical University Studies has taken on the corporatization of higher education as compromising teaching, learning, and research; it has pointed to the enormous growth in the administrative ranks as a repudiation of faculty expertise; and it has argued that austerity has taken a disproportionate toll on poor, working-class students and students of color. But Newfield's argument is couched in the very same terms as those the "disruptor class" uses: cost, efficiency, effectiveness. Tuition hikes, private student loans, the "entrepreneurial campus" are ultimately worse for state budgets in terms of administrative costs, startup needs, and the loss of revenue from defaults, even though they may benefit private interests.

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The Great Mistake is laid out systematically: Newfield identifies eight stages in the "cycle of devolution" of public universities, provides a general overview of them, devotes a chapter to each stage, and, finally, offers possible solutions. At the core of his argument is that education is a public good that fosters what he calls the "democratization of intelligence." The goal of public education is "the combination of broad access and high quality" (3), a goal that in the past four decades has been undercut at every turn.

Indeed, the first stage in Newfield's "Eight Stages of Decline" is "University retreat from public goods." While

the other stages – subsidizing outside funders, tuition hikes, cuts to public funding, increased student debt, the increasing reliance on private vendors to leverage public funds, unequal cuts between institutions and disciplines, and “post-productivity capitalism” – all play a crucial role, and bolster each other, for Newfield, neoliberalism’s original sin has been the ongoing destruction of the concept of education as good for everyone. In these terms, higher education plays a cultural and social role much as vaccines protect the public health. It lays the groundwork for other kinds of attainment, both personal and professional, and raises the basic level of intellectual engagement for the entire population.

Newfield has certainly done his homework. The chapters that discuss the budgetary mess that privatization has caused are thick with graphs and charts and a flurry of numbers. At one point even he realizes that this might be overwhelming for the lay reader, and gives the fainter of heart permission to skip the recitation of some pretty in-depth budget wonkery. But I was glad that I soldiered through the numbers, not least because, as Newfield points out, the only way we can counter the fiction of “market solutions” is to have a clear and detailed understanding of how university funding and expenditure actually work. Similarly, *The Great Mistake* has one of the clearest, most comprehensive analyses of quite how damaging the shift from grants to loans was for students, as well as the collusion between banks, loan consolidators, and government that allowed outrageous interest rates and nonpayment penalties, and exempted student loans from bankruptcy provisions.

The Great Mistake effectively challenges some of the assumptions even those of us who champion public higher education believe. For example, he convincingly proves that state disinvestment is more the result of tuition hikes than the other way around, and that foundation and government funding for STEM fields actually drains money from university coffers to cover all kinds of indirect costs. Moreover, he warmed my humanist heart by confirming what I had always suspected: that rather than being a drain on the economy, the arts and humanities actually produce more revenue for universities than they consume resources and, ultimately, that they subsidize the outsize expenses of the sciences.

Ironically, the book is least effective in its final chapter, in which Newfield outlines his plan for reversing these trends and restoring public higher education to its rightful purpose: high quality education on a mass scale. He approvingly cites Bernie Sanders’s proposal of free college for all as a remedy for neoliberal logic. This goal has recently proven less clear-cut, as Andrew Cuomo’s Excelsior Program in New York state has shown. While it provides free tuition for all New York public college and university students, it requires them to complete 30 credits each year to maintain eligibility, a provision that excludes the least privileged populations of college-goers: part time

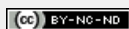
students, many of whom work and/or care for family members; community college students who can rarely maintain 5 classes each semester; and full-time students who register the current requirement of 12 credits each semester but due to hardship, insufficient preparation, or personal difficulties have to drop at least one course (this is very common at Hunter College, where I teach). Finally, one strategy that might make earning 30 credits each year manageable – taking one or two classes over the summer – is out of reach for many students now that federal TAP grants no longer cover summer school.

This book is a major addition to the Critical University Studies corpus, and should be required reading for anyone concerned about the fate of public education in the United States. It will be especially useful for students of US higher education since it is so heavily grounded in data as much as argument and polemic (which is not to say that it isn’t polemical). I could even imagine faculty assigning chapters or parts of chapters to first-year composition classes – Newfield’s writing is clear and accessible enough for beginning college students even as his larger argument is sophisticated enough for graduate-level study.

One small critique: while I greatly appreciated the macro-level analysis of the book, and the focus on large, nationwide policy shifts, it was hard to know how to translate his insights into my own teaching (beyond assigning the book itself). Certainly this book doesn’t try to be all things to all people – it has a clear agenda and it follows that path diligently and effectively. But I would have appreciated some discussion of what those of us who teach in public colleges and universities might do in our own institutions to counter the logics he so powerfully anatomizes, both in relation to our administrators and in connection to our students.

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I recognize, though, that this is not his goal. Newfield is going after the big fish. He argues for a massive ideological shift in state legislatures, university administrators, and the general public. I wish I could feel more confident in that possibility. But at the very least, Newfield provides a useful primer in the failures of privatization as well as a road map for political action, and spells out the terms on which radical and progressive educators should work towards the reinvigoration of the public university.



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