

Mitchell's Musings 9-7-15: Higher Ed's Political Microaggression

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The standard Labor Day article either talks about whether organized labor will make a comeback after a long period of decline, or it picks up on some other aspect of labor market trends and problems such as stagnant wages, pay inequality, job insecurity, etc. This musing is being written shortly before the Labor Day articles for 2015 actually appear. So what the actual balance will be among these two types is unknown.

My own guess is that because of the decades-long trend in falling unionization rates, there will be more of the latter (labor market issues) – probably many more – than of the former (union comeback). You have only to ask what “CIO” stood for in 1955 (when the CIO disappeared into the AFL-CIO and unionization was at its peak) and what happens nowadays if you Google “CIO.” You are more likely nowadays to run into “Chief Information Officer” as the meaning of CIO or – even more tellingly – “Chief Investment Officer,” than you are to encounter the 1955 meaning. (If you don't know the 1955 meaning, you're just making my point.)

So assuming articles on problems of the contemporary labor force are mainly what you will encounter, my further guess is that what you will also find is the idea that the jobs of the future will require college degrees. Higher ed, in other words, is the solution to today's labor market problems, at least in that telling. Let's put aside the inconvenient fact that according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the top projected job openings are in retail, food service, and other low-education and low-paid occupations.¹ What we are talking about here is public *perceptions*, not necessarily reality.

Universities and colleges have long been referred to as “ivory towers.” Presumably what is meant by that phrase is insulation from the “real world.” Given that longstanding view, combined with the more recent perception that the solution for labor market problems is getting a college degree, and you have a circumstance that did not exist in the past. If, in the past, universities and colleges were insulated ivory towers, *but you didn't need to go there*, their ivory tower aspects were a mere curiosity. If, on the other hand, you (or your kids) *do* have to go there, what might have been a curiosity back in the day becomes a potential conflict if you see future barriers to entrance.

The problem becomes especially acute in *public* higher education. Public institutions – because they are supposed to offer lower-cost attendance options than private - thanks to government subsidy – become viewed as the utilitarian route to labor-market advancement. And if the folks in charge of those institutions seem engaged in odd activities unrelated to efficient and inexpensive student processing, public concerns are raised. What are those folks doing with taxpayer money? Why should I as a taxpayer be subsidizing such activities at a time of rising tuition?

The most obvious elements of friction relate to admissions (access) and, as noted, rising tuition. During the Great Recession, state governments tended to reduce appropriations for public higher ed as tax revenue declined. As a result, tuitions rose and, in some cases, enrollments were cut. With a piece of their budgets cut away, such adjustments by public higher ed institutions were inevitable. In some cases the response of public higher ed institutions was also semi-privatization, usually admission of out-of-state and foreign applicants at higher-than-local sticker prices for tuition. Typically, however, the actual

¹See <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.t08.htm>.

decisions to raise tuition and/or cut enrollments (or to semi-privatize) were made – not by the legislators and governors who cut the budget – but by the immediate authorities who run public higher ed institutions. So, conveniently for legislators and governors, blame was deflected to those authorities. They made the choice.

While the Great Recession is over, its after-effects linger. Public higher ed authorities – having been cast as the villains in the tuition/enrollment/semi-privatization episode – must now appeal to already offended voters for funding restoration and support. Higher ed authorities may feel that it is unfair to have to shoulder the blame, but that is the reality. They can only go so far in trying to point fingers at legislators and governors since neither are anxious to assume blame, even retroactively. And both are needed, along with voters, for support.

I am most familiar with the case of California, which has the image of a diverse “blue” state that takes generally liberal positions. So let’s look at voters there. You might expect a greater degree of public sympathy for higher ed in California than elsewhere because of its blue reputation. However, it ain’t necessarily so. Like a lot of things, it depends on perceptions.

The last gubernatorial election in California was held in November 2014, but the outcome was known well in advance. Incumbent Jerry Brown was expected to win reelection by a large margin. Under those circumstances, with no real contest at the top of the ticket, voter turnout was expected to be low (and it was). So voters who did turn out were presumably biased toward those in the electorate most interested in public affairs.

In order to predict the results of elections, the California Field Poll attempts to focus on those in the public who actually will vote. A few weeks before the November 2014 election, it polled what it considered to be a sample of “likely voters.”² What was the demographic and political makeup of that sample? The table below provides a summary that may surprise.

Democrats	43%
Republicans	34%
No party/other	23%
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Strongly conservative	20%
Moderately conservative	11%
Middle-of-the-road	41%
Moderately liberal	11%
Strongly liberal	17%
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Age 18-29	11%
Age 30-39	14%
Age 40-49	16%
Age 50-64	32%
Age 65+	27%
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²<http://www.field.com/fieldpollonline/subscribers/RIs2489.pdf>

White, non-Hispanic	70%
Latino	16%
African-American	6%
Asian/other	8%

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Male	50%
Female	50%

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Union household	18%
Nonunion household	82%

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If you want to characterize the median California voter – whose support presumably public higher ed institutions want - that voter is white, nonunion, age 50+, middle-of-the-road politically, independent, and equally likely to be male or female.³ So the key to political success in California is definitely not denigrating or offending older white males. Other poll data suggest that the median likely voter has just a bachelor's degree, i.e., 50% of likely voters have educations below that level, 50% have educations at that level or above.⁴

The notion that California is inherently “progressive” on social issues isn't suggested or supported by the history of state ballot propositions over the past quarter century despite its blue state reputation. Consider the following election results:

Prop 187 – Ban on public services for undocumented immigrants (passed 1994)

Prop 209 – Ban on affirmative action in public higher ed admissions and state contracting (passed 1996)

Prop 227 – Sharp limits on bilingual education (passed 1998)

Prop 22 – Ban on gay marriage (passed 2000)

Prop 8 – Ban on gay marriage (passed 2008)

Clearly, if some of these propositions were on the California ballot today, they would not pass. Attitudes do change over time.⁵ But to the extent that California – despite its blue state image – is on the leading edge of emerging causes, that leadership is more likely to be true in the environmental area rather than when it comes to social attitudes.

Much of the latest social agitation in higher ed, including in the public institutions of California, has involved such matters as microaggressions, statements – perhaps inadvertent – that might offend. A good deal of this agitation has developed *within* universities. It isn't coming from median voters who

³Note that there is a big difference between the general population and the likely voter population. Children don't vote. Non-citizens don't vote. Those eligible to vote have to register and then turn out.

⁴<http://www.field.com/fieldpollonline/subscribers/RIs2490.pdf>

⁵Not all the propositions would necessarily be reversed today. A move in the state legislature to put a proposition on the ballot repealing Prop 209 (affirmative action) not long ago was quickly killed when the Asian community – that felt its kids would be disadvantaged by repeal – vocally objected.

aren't preoccupied with microaggression, but who do have concerns about tuition and access – based on all those labor market predictions that you must have a college degree in the future.

Those voters are not committed to public higher ed institutions as centers for promoting social change as California's ballot history suggests. Particularly given the coarse discourse readily found in everyday political debate, the internet, popular entertainment, etc., what is characterized as a microaggression in university circles seems mild to anyone with a TV or laptop. Ten or twenty years from now, perhaps voters of that future period may have changed their views. But for now, issues such as tuition, access, and student debt are the big issues for higher ed. In contrast, a focus on other matters by those folks running public higher ed institutions is likely at best to appear off-topic and unresponsive to the concerns of the median voter.

Put another way, being off-topic and unresponsive may be viewed by median voters as a microaggression against them, what they think, and how they talk. And there are consequences if that is what voters come to perceive about public higher ed and believe is going on there. Within academia, there seems to be a body of psychological research on microaggression in the context of interpersonal interactions. It goes along with longstanding research on framing and hidden prejudices. Continued research of that type should be encouraged. But the research so far seems to lack an outward component when it comes to application to higher education.

More precisely, what is odd is not the research in the abstract, but its policy consequences within higher ed institutions. There is much effort at documenting the impact of the microaggression controversy on everyone except those median voters on whose goodwill the fate of public higher ed institutions depends. Put another way, there seems to be great concern about the impact of what might be said *within* the institution. But there is no concern – or even perception – as to what the impact might be when bureaucratic university policies on microaggression leak outside the institution.

Thus, when a University of California guide that indicated that asking people where they are from is equivalent to telling them they aren't "true American(s)" is discovered, and is (predictably) circulated on the internet, the guide – and the official "seminars" at which it was used - become a target of ridicule and offense.⁶ Did the University really believe that someone saying America was the "land of opportunity" was a micro-aggressor? And, no, it's not just right-wing news media that pick up such stories. That episode found itself quickly aired in the mainstream.⁷ It creates the image of academic administrators gone amuck with political correctness at a time when they should be focused on access and affordability.

Ultimately, the idea that through official policy speech should be constrained so it never offends anyone within the institution, *while at the same time its impact on outside political constituents should not only be ignored, but not even recognized*, seems bizarre. It is even more bizarre in a world in which those median voters on the outside are being told that the key to labor market success is a college degree and

⁶http://www.ucop.edu/academic-personnel-programs/files/seminars/Tool_Recognizing_Microaggressions.pdf . The official university position seems to be that speech was not being forbidden but that attendees at the seminar were being sensitized.

⁷<http://www.scpr.org/programs/airtalk/2015/06/24/43412/microaggressions-should-they-be-censored-on-colleg/>

that their political support is thus needed to fund public higher ed. In an era of economic insecurity, where is the research on the impact of university-generated microaggression against the median voter? Where are the seminars on the external impact?