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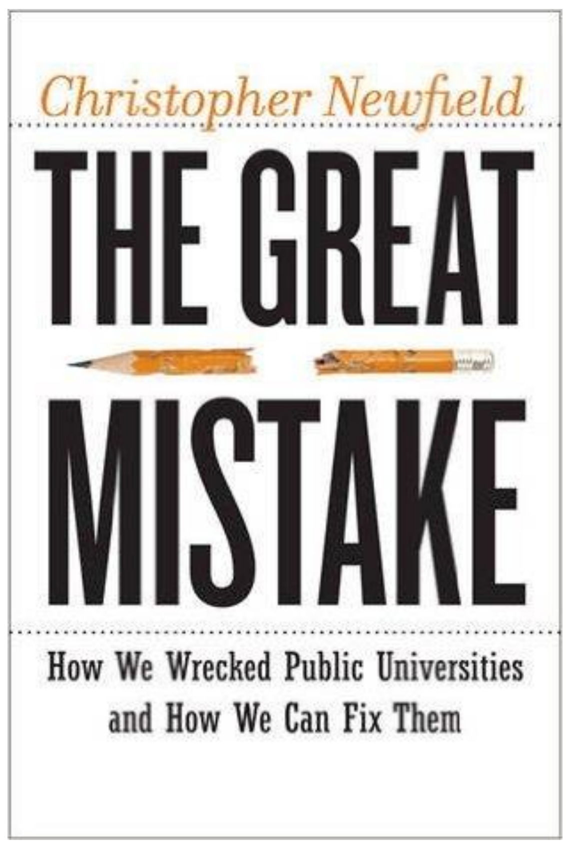
Reviewed by Sarah Zipf
The Pennsylvania State University
United States



In *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* Christopher Newfield identifies some of the key problems that plague American higher education. Newfield names privatization as the main culprit of the decline of American higher education because it "creates hidden costs that are rarely mentioned" (p. 27). With continued state cuts and rising tuition, this timely book persuasively unmasks the real issues.

Newfield, a professor of literature at the University of California, Santa-Barbara, spent over 20 years in the UC system, watching as the price of tuition increased, and seeing the quality of student learning decrease and higher education turning to the private sector for funding. The chapters of *The Great Mistake* unfold to demonstrate Newfield's "devolutionary" cycle: an eight-stage process that explores the interconnected relationships between various practices of privatization in higher education. Newfield writes, "Our

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challenge is to describe the workings of the nonhomogeneous cluster of activities called privatization" (p. 37). Readers will be thankful that Newfield has simplified this discussion through a graphical representation of the devolutionary cycle that guides his chapter-by-chapter exposition. This structure requires that the book be read from cover to cover. Readers who sample individual chapters are likely to miss the subtle influences that Newfield argues have created the decline of American higher education. In fact, Newfield would say that is exactly the problem; we have not taken the long view to see the patterns of the issues plaguing American higher education. Rather, we have sectioned the issues off as the single fail-point and tried to solve each in isolation.

The devolutionary cycle begins with forgetting that higher education is a public good because "society doesn't see the nonmarket value of higher education" (p. 34). The economic downturn of 2008 "began to decimate [state] budgets" (p. 17). As public institutions have increased tuition and turned to alternative revenue sources, state funding has continued to decrease over the years (p. 135). The loss of public funding pushed institutions into deeper privatization agreements and "obligated the universities to leave no stone unturned and no suitor rejected in the tireless search for private donors and sponsorships" (p. 55). The cycle continues, Newfield argues, as philanthropic and research grants come and go, subject to changing priorities of donors and grant-makers. These new funding sources are not large enough to cover full operational needs. The search for revenues plays out like a large shell game, with institutions moving money around to cover one expense over another while still capturing public resources along the way. These "[c]ross-subsidies are opaque to the payers, not openly negotiated, and damage some fields to help others" (p. 95). The lack of transparency hides the realities of cross-subsidies, further undermining the institutional need for state funding. The difference in cost and revenue is made up through tuition increases, leading to increased student loan burden. The related lack of quality learning outcomes decreases the public awareness for and the justification of the need for higher education, and thus the devolutionary cycle continues. Once you see Newfield's devolutionary cycle, it is hard to "unsee" it.

The cyclical nature of the university is to get money, spend money, get more money, and spend more money, what former University of Iowa president Howard Bowen labeled as the revenue theory of cost (Bowen, 1980). In "Stage 2: Subsidizing the Outside Sponsors," Newfield provides a quick review of this theory to show how an institution comes to rely so heavily on the outside via private funds. Institutions can always find new ways of spending money when the revenue increases, but are hard pressed to decrease spending when the revenue decreases (Bowen, 1980). Newfield explains: "It's expensive to keep up with the Joneses" (p. 139).

An underlying theme of *The Great Mistake* is the need to refocus a public college education back to a public good and not a private good. Most of society sees the value of free, quality K-12 education, paid for through tax dollars; however, taxpayers do not extend the same value to college level education. A complete paradigm shift would be necessary for the public to push for greater state funding (Doyle & Kirst, 2015). Comparing the benefits of public higher education to that of K-12 makes sense, as there are similar benefits to society and somewhat similar budget shortfalls. The difference, however, is that college is seen mainly as a private good because a college degree is "rivalrous and excludable" (p. 65). Because of this, and despite intermittent public outcry over rising prices, institutions are left insulated and sometimes demonized entities. Therefore institutions will have to solve the price issue by increasing educational productivity through cheaper options (Doyle & Kirst, 2015).

Newfield highlights this dilemma and the search for technology solutions in "Stage 6: Private Vendors Leverage Public Funds: The Case of the MOOCs." Here, Newfield explains how the initial promotion of MOOCs involved the desire to cut costs and find alternative methods of providing less-resource dependent instruction. MOOCs also "fit so well into the privatization paradigm" (p. 223). However, he makes a compelling case that technology, deployed without intentional instruction and pedagogical development, is not going to fix learning problems. When the private sector came to institutions with the promise of cost-saving mechanisms, the faculty lost leverage in the art of teaching. "Stage 6" provides stark examples of how *not* to implement technology in higher education, serving as a cautionary tale to others that may plan to follow suit. Newfield explains what happens when an institution does not exercise "educational due diligence" for quality online higher education and how the rush to MOOCs continues the devolutionary cycle, while at the same time, decreases educational outcomes (p. 256).

Newfield may be overstating the case here. There are good educational programs offered online in the growing ranks of traditional higher education providers that are reformulating a college education to the digital age. Not all institutions faced the challenge of MOOCs, but all institutions must decide how best to implement technology as a strategy on their campus. The shortcuts influenced by privatization described by Newfield may be real, but this section of the book did not do justice to technology's potential to enhance and change educational practices. Technology will remain a constant of 21st century education; the "digital natives" on college campuses will demand it (Levine & Dean, 2012).

In continuation of the devolutionary cycle, Newfield claims, the public does not see public education as a public good anymore because college graduates lack specific educational outcomes. "Stage 7: Unequal Funding Cuts Attainment" argues that the quality of education declines when funding cuts make the faculty workload unattainable. Newfield criticizes the main thesis of Arun and Roska's (2011) head-turning book *Academically Adrift*, which placed the blame for academic drift on student behavior and lack of instructor effort, as hiding the root causes of threats to high quality higher education. To understand declines in academic outcomes, Newfield asks instead: "How does the combination of decreased public funding and high debt cause … lower attainment? (p. 273). Newfield points to the decreases in state funding through privatization and increases to tuition which push students to work more hours and change majors away from instructor-heavy liberal arts programs. Newfield compares this hidden side of privatization as the "B-side…that never got played" (p. 270).

Having spent years working in financial aid, I am always interested in how authors tackle the complexities of the current student financing system, including ballooning student loan debt. On this issue, Newfield's response is consistent with the overall thesis: "Financial aid today reflects the privatization effect we've been discussing, in which universities replace declining public resources with private funds, in this case from students and their families via the financial aid process" (p. 191). Newfield makes a convincing argument that high tuition and high financial aid do not make college more affordable, as it hides the price from students and families. This situation manifests in expanding student loan debt, a key point of consideration in "Stage 8: Universities Build the Post-Middle Class."

While Newfield does not directly couple a neoliberal economy with student loan debt, he points out how society loses a sense of how education is a public good when the college educated are struggling economically. Neoliberal expectations were that "each individual in this new globalized economy was obliged to continuously increase her productivity through advanced technical training, higher education, and the like" (p. 288). However, a neoliberal economy is not rewarding college graduates with high paying jobs; recent graduates are facing high-skill, low-paying jobs and student loan debt. He closes another cycle when noting how universities mirror the high-skill and low-paying jobs phenomenon by hiring adjunct faculty, which, by the way, is also part of the devolutionary cycle. Newfield connects back to the devolutionary cycle, explaining that colleges "have a lower social value in a post-middle-class society" which means continued cuts in educational funding and this effectively continues the devolutionary cycle (p. 301)

With a new Presidential Administration, it is hard to tell how much deeper higher education privatization will go. Like many scholars in higher education, Newfield does not provide the fix for *The Great Mistake*. This book is "not only about policy errors but about the framework or paradigm that enables them" (p. 308). Newfield creates a way to think of the entire landscape for the complex situation institutions face when trying to educate students with the highest quality, best learning outcomes, and fewer resources than ever before. In the last section of the book, Newfield provides a "recovery cycle," which means to counter the stages of the devolutionary cycle. Newfield writes: "There is also good news: each stage can be undone, and the decline cycle can be reversed" (p. 49). The first step is to stress the notion that education is a public good and reinstate funding, which will push back on the need for privatization funding models and hopefully undo *The Great Mistake*.

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About the Reviewer

Sarah Zipf is a Ph.D. student in higher education at the Pennsylvania State University. Before beginning her doctoral studies, Sarah worked in financial aid. Her research interests include financial aid, adult students, and distance education. She earned her B.A. and M.Ed. from Drury University.

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