

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

Lili Fabilli and Eric Hoffer Essay Prize

2015-16 Topic: A Public University

Winners: Evan Bauer, Eric Dasmalchi, Natya Dharmosetio, Paige M. Johnson, Mihir Joshi, Pawanjot Kaur, Peiting Carrie Li, William McGregor, Phillip Merlo, and Sharada Narayan

Evan Bauer – “A Public University”

On my dorm floor freshman year, among just thirty-five students, there were eleven different languages spoken: English, French, Spanish, German, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Bengali, Arabic- even Tibetan and Armenian. These students grew up bilingual, and they would slip into a different tongue with ease upon answering calls from their parents. I would stop whatever I was doing and listen, struck by the intimacy of these calls, oblivious to exactly what was being said.

While my hometown, Santa Cruz, California, is a very liberal and accepting community, it is not particularly diverse; the vast majority of its residents are either Latino or caucasian, and the only foreign language my high school offered was Spanish. I think this, in part, is what spurred my fascination with language upon coming to Berkeley – the leap from having exposure to only two languages to over ten in just my first day at Cal was an exhilarating one.

In my time at Berkeley thus far, I have chosen to pursue Japanese as a foreign language. In reading the translated works of my favorite Japanese authors in English, I always felt that there must be something more waiting beyond the barrier of translation. The most salient confirmation of this suspicion that I've discovered so far is that there are several tiers of politeness in Japanese speech, and verbs will conjugate differently depending on which speech style one speaks in – a construction absent from English. This is ultimately a reflection of the importance Japanese culture places on respect and humility. Learning this was the first time I really began to think about language as gateway to a deeper understanding of other cultures.

But we can't all learn every language, so what are we to do? Fortunately, language, I

believe, extends beyond simply what is spoken. There's the language of passion, communicated in a student's eyes as she talks about why she's studying epidemiology. There's the language of celebration, demonstrated in the freeness of his hips and shoulders as he dances after another long week. And there's the language of loss, conveyed by how her frame sags with each step, as though any deviation from her route to lecture might cause her collapse. These are perhaps the most important languages of all-languages that require no formal training and serve only to remind us of our similarities and common humanity. This, I believe, is the beauty of UC Berkeley's status as a public university-it is a microcosm representative not only of California's remarkable diversity, but of the world's as well, in which students come to understand that these observed similarities form a connection stronger than our differences. And it is this facet of UC Berkeley that I find most crucial-that it produces citizens equipped with the tolerance and empathy necessary in an increasingly globalized world-citizens who will, upon hearing a man conversing with his mother in a tongue tied to a region halfway around the world, marvel at those words that simultaneously mean nothing and everything.

Eric Dasmalchi

Sather Gate. The Campanile. Wheeler Hall. All these and more loom large to students as they walk to class, and to the wider world on me glossy faces of admissions brochures. Symbols for UC Berkeley, yes, but by extension also symbols of "a public university". This leads to me lackluster definition of that term as something UC Berkeley happens to be, perhaps with the hope that some of this campus' fame may rub off on the term and further reinforce that prestige. Almost annually, some ranking comes out and UC Berkeley is once again crowned "#1 Public University in the World", a qualifier that still somehow seems worth bragging about. Indeed it's possible to say "public university" countless times without ever pausing to think about what it actually means. I've thought a little bit about that, and here's what I have to say:

A public university is more than a qualifier, and it goes beyond this campus. A public university is an idea.

A public university is a promise. It's a gift passed on through generations based on the simple belief that any capable young person today who desires a higher education should be able to access it. This gift comes with strings attached; today's students are expected to pay their own way far more than those of the previous generation. Yet this mission of access is not lost. Not only is the tuition of the public university comparatively low, the public university opens its doors to more and more students each year, trying its best to expand along with its mission.

A public university is an exchange. Society provides the university's concrete, electricity, and manpower. The university is then called upon to help solve the challenges of society: challenges as disparate as climate change, extremism, and economic inequality. These challenges will be overcome with the help of the "products" of the public university: students and research. If the public university must be seen as an investment, this would

be the return. In *The Uses of the University*, Clark Kerr called this vision a "multiversity": a place that "serves society almost slavishly", connecting with "legislators, farmer's and businessmen". Kerr's vision is of course a controversial one- some students don't wish to take part in what he described as, well, a "mechanism".

This may seem stifling, but let me point out something curious. There's no contract. I could finish my education at Berkeley, then live out the rest of my life doing absolutely nothing with the skills and knowledge I'd gain. No amount of investment, bureaucracy, vision, or anything else can force graduates of the public university to give back to society in any particular way.

I've realized that the public university relies on faith. Specifically, the simple faith that the knowledge it provides will not only enable students to make a positive change, but inspire them as well. I've realized that the public university is a beautiful thing.

Natya Dharmosetio – “#1 Public University in the World”

It was 6 AM on a normal weekday. There was a 17 year old girl barely awake waiting to hear back from the last university that she hadn't heard back from to find out the fate of her post-secondary school period of life. As she laid' on her bed, her laptop was on her tummy, eyes half open, wi-fi loading very slowly, but what eventually loaded on the screen was never in her anticipation. She rushed outside her bedroom to catch her parents before they left for work, and showed them the computer screen. Her mom made a high-pitched squeal, and her dad smiled from ear to ear then proceeded to give a thumbs up. Words were nowhere to be found but simply glittering eyes of happiness sufficed.

That was what it was like when I got accepted to UC Berkeley, the #1 Public University in the world.

But... what does it mean to be at the #1 public university in the world?

Bragging rights? Yeah.

Make parents proud? Obviously, because they wouldn't ever shut up about it.

Do ground-breaking research? Probably.

Get a job out of this? Sure.

Being happy and having a meaningful and significant impact on your surroundings?

Hmmm...

Now about to end my third semester in college, it has been way too often that I sadly come across people who are not enjoying their time here. Too much work, lack of sleep, unsupportive and way over-the-top competitive peers - it all adds up to being incredibly overwhelmed and to a diminishing self-confidence. At times I would think why are people so sad and negative? I am currently very fortunate to be the happiest I have been, which is why it makes me very sad to see friends going on a downward slope from just being overwhelmed with everything. It is the inconvenient truth that at this moment in my life, saying "just be happy" is an incredible overstatement and is apparently not easy to achieve.

So what does it mean to be at the #1 public university in the world?

Work endlessly day and night on school assignments? Yeah.

Study for midterm after midterm? Totally.

Have colleagues in class become hostile competition? Perhaps.

The load of your backpack dragging you down physically and mentally? I guess.

Leading to heavy depression or even suicide? ...It's not impossible.

Now what can the #1 public university in the world do about this?

Paige M. Johnson – *Becoming Public*

Act 1: A Machine

500 pages. 500 pages to print or copy. That is, of course, when our single machine has not collapsed under the weight of an entire department's needs. Do I sacrifice my eyes to the insidious glow of screens or do I sacrifice my allotment? I see fellow grad students hunched over single sheets of impossibly small text. It seems as if the eyes are sacrificed either way. The ivy-covered towers of the Eastern coast did not prepare me for this. There, unlimited blank white sheets rained from the sky into the hands of eager undergraduates. Welcome to public school.

Act 2: A Body

Sometimes it is difficult to demarcate the line between the university and the wider community of Berkeley. We have, what some would call, an open campus. I often see tourists wandering through the campus. Cameras slung around their necks. Squatting to capture the perfect angle of Sather Gate. But not everyone constitutes the public of a public university. I see her often on the tenuous edge of the campus. Hunched over on a bench as hundreds of students stream through the gates and across Bancroft. Her limbs are swollen and her eyes downcast. Sometimes I overhear students comment on her smell. In my copy of *Fiat Lux: The University of California*, Chief justice Earl Warren implores, "Californians, this is the time for us to do the utmost for our university because it has done its utmost for us". What if President Napolitano tasked Ansel Adams to capture the universities of California today, not as they are but as they will be? Would she, a body on the edge, make it into those black and white pages?

Act 3: A Movement

My first memories of UC Berkeley are framed by protest. As fees rose students flooded into the heart of campus to fight for a public university whose future would not be devoid of accessibility. As the years have passed I have continually witnessed the UC Berkeley community standing in solidarity against the foreclosure of *what* publics make up *the* public of a public university. The legacies of Free Speech movements and Vietnam Day marches drew me into the light of the next one hundred years of the grand UC project. This light has begun to flicker and dim in the face of the changing winds of divestment, precarious labor, and the tamping of free speech. Yet, I've seen a deeper more committed sense of "public" rise to protect this light. A sense of public that reshapes itself into "community" through collective struggle. A portrait of the public university as it will be.

Mihir Joshi – **Dad.**

The Slums of Mumbai, 1935.

He continued his regular routine. Wake up at 5, be out the door by 5:20 and be at work by 8. His bike was a little rusty but she still worked, and that's all he really needed. Turning the corner he saw that the rain had damaged the roads again- but nothing could wash off the smile on his face today. Today, he was a father.

The workday took its usual toll. Getting yelled at for falling asleep at the desk, avoiding the judging gaze when there wasn't a bag to open at lunchtime, being held back to finish up the work he didn't care for. As he walked out the door to meet the warm moonlight and smell of masala roaming the streets, he stuck to the routine.

"Some day, this work will allow him to be the first one to go to college. Some day, this work will pay off."

College of Engineering Pune, 1982.

Never again.

Regardless of what his friends said, he wasn't going to ditch class ever again. His Dad may not have said anything, but he knew. And that look in Dad's eyes was enough to remind him of what was really important in life.

He had worked his butt off to get here, the years of studying by the candles and going to bed hungry had built up to this moment. With the final exam and placements coming, now was the time to double down and emerge a champion.

He may not have been as smart as the rest of them, but damn was he going to work twice as hard specially since he couldn't have his parents pay their way to his As. Nevertheless, at least engineering was fun- he couldn't imagine what it would be like working as a teller like Dad.

Results day. Everyone is crowded around the board, he guesses it's best to start from the bottom not really get his hopes up. Okay maybe he lands amongst the distinguished. What? Did they not even get his exam. NO. The top? The best score in the whole year? This is amazing.

He leaves immediately, puts his head down to avoid his friends and runs home. He bolts through the door, out of breath and finds his dad behind the paper. He touches his feet asking for blessing. He hugs him tighter than ever before. They both wipe each others tears away, knowing that number one meant they had reached exactly where they wanted to be, and would never see each other again.

University of California, Berkeley 2014.

God I can't believe I'm finally here- the first one to go to college in the US. I bet my grandparents never imagined this moment was possible. I knew it'd be hard to leave home, but I never expected for my Dad to cry like that. I wonder why.

Pawanjot Kaur – “A Public University”

A high-school freshman girl looks at a "How to get to your dream college" brochure at a local college fair at her temple. She has dreams. One of which is to go to a private university. She imagines herself in a uniform attending classes, because to that naive high-school freshman girl, a private university is nothing short of Hogwarts. She imagines tall buildings, adorned with green ivy. She can't be blamed for her naivety because this is the breakdown that her counselor's give her - private universities are better than public ones. Three years pass. After the long tedious application process, she receives her admittance letters and it is at that moment that she realizes that she has to make a choice. Up until this point, everyone had convinced her that a private school education would be worth a lot more than a public school education and yet she stops in her tracks before she makes this decision. It is at this moment that she realizes how much she has underestimated the worth of public universities and the opportunities that they bring.

I am that same naive high-school freshman.

In my very first college class, while sitting amongst eight hundred other students, I realized that students at a public university are exposed to a lot of ethnic diversity. Due to this, the campus becomes a vibrant microcosm of the entire world, a safe place to share ideas and learn about other people. Through this environment, students become cognizant of major events such as political movements happening around the globe. A public university is home to a variety of cultures, ethnicities and people of all socioeconomic backgrounds. It is remarkable to see the microcosm unite under the name of education, helping build a solidarity whose roots will only continue to grow deeper as time passes.

I also realized how lucky I was to be walking on a university campus. Before coming to the United States, higher education was only a distant and hazy dream. It existed in my imagination of my future, yet I could not see a clear-cut path to achieving that future. In Punjab, India, only the top students are given a chance to pursue higher education, and that is only if the student's family has connections with government officials and has a lot of wealth. Due to these conditions, I did not think I had a chance to be studying amongst other intellectuals and becoming a scholar.

Even upon reaching the United States, I possessed the misconception that only certain students are admitted to universities based on factors such as wealth and prestige. However, I was proved to be wrong. Just like the simple thump-thump of a beating heart is reason enough for a person to smile and be thankful, being a vibrant thread in the colorful canvas of a public university is reason enough for me to keep achieving my goals.

Peiting Carrie Li – “This Most Unlikely of Dreams”

Berkeley is a place of daily contradictions — a public university in an increasingly privatized world. Here the market imperatives of efficiency and rationalization collide with an irrational dream of equal access to an education, regardless of economic resources.

Lecture halls are filled with hundreds of heads, some nodding off. Us graduate student instructors are loaded with discussion sections stretched to 20 students. My classmates and students are of all kinds: a single mother, a firefighter, and a former theater accountant in his forties. Some can barely put together a coherent paragraph, others stun with the lyric beauty of an opening sentence.

The hallways of Dwinelle are populated by students sitting on the floor, waiting for office hours to start. Some come with paper drafts, eager to refine their arguments. Others appear only after a cajoling email, sheepish about a stack of assignments not yet submitted.

The more efficient course of action would be to spend as little time on teaching and grading as possible, not to return their papers with comments on grammar and structure, and instead to focus on being productive, chum out chapters and articles in order to have a slim chance at that tenure track job and avoid the precarious adjunct fate that has

fallen so many of my peers. But it is hard to turn a cold ear to the students as they talk about the jobs they are working to pay their tuition, the domestic violence they endured at home, and the anxieties about finding a job after they graduate.

Even if one survives long enough to become a professor, it seems they are subject to pressures of a different scale. Their offices and salaries are modest, but teaching loads are heavy. It is hard to feel like one can make a request of someone already so burdened. One gets the sense that they too are working to do so much with much less.

Sometimes I chance upon members of the wider community. I see their thick glasses and grey hair in classes and at lectures. Once at the monthly poetry reading in the Morrison Library, an elder woman saw me standing at the back of the room and motioned to an empty seat next to her. A professor in the music department read Robert Haas's poem "Meditation at Lagunitas." "All the new thinking is about loss./In this it resembles all the old thinking./The idea, for example, that each particular erases/the luminous clarity of a general idea." And for just a few moments, we all sit together quietly in that big open room, with tall ceilings. "That was a wonderful reading. I hope to see you again next time," she said.

Let us keep this place, our public university, this most unlikely of dreams.

William McGregor – “A Public University”

A public university is just that — public. It is where the mosaic meets the melting pot, where people from vastly different circumstances come together to quench their thirst for both knowledge and success. I once asked a student/worker, whose

friendship I cherish, why she came back as a fifth year senior when she often said she was homesick. Her response was that at what other time could she have others pay for her education? I was pleased that she didn't say because it's free. She acknowledged that it's not free and that public universities exist because the citizens of this country recognize that education is the route to success and that everyone should have the opportunity to achieve that success. Her father never made more than \$15,000 in a year and both of her parents' formal education stopped at kindergarten. Yet here she is.

More recently I asked her if she had a 4.0 grade point average. It was a rather impertinent question but I asked because I was so impressed with her intelligence. She answered no, that she was somewhere in the middle of the pack. Somewhat piqued, she added that there was a difference between being smart and working hard. I thought, maybe so, but it is smart to work hard and that this was one of the most important things she has learned at a public university. Thankfully, some of the public at this public university has rubbed off on her. For the past couple of years, through a program run by the university, she has served as a mentor for elementary school children. She is eager to pass on the opportunity that she has had. She has also served as an interpreter at the office of an attorney who works pro bono for people who have suffered abuse in other countries and are seeking asylum. Imagine what the world would have missed if a public university hadn't helped form this person. In short, a public university doesn't level the playing field; it is the playing field, an arena where those who work hard can demonstrate their abilities in a challenging yet encouraging environment.

Public universities are under duress in two ways at the moment. There is pressure to conform to thought stifling ideologies, both on the left and on the right. And there is great pressure to reduce or even eliminate public funding. But public universities have experienced comparable challenges in the past and surmounted them. And although I've said many flattering things about my student/worker friend, I've left out the most important thing that she does. She gives me hope. I see her, and knowing that there is at least one public university in every state, I can multiply her by the hundreds of thousands of men and women attending these universities and conclude that maybe the future doesn't look so bleak after all.

Phillip Merlo – “Public Hope”

Universities are not merely academic institutions of learning and research. Universities create outcomes. Some of these outcomes are academic, such as educating students. Other outcomes are purely research driven. At a public university these outcomes are public benefits. On individual and societal levels they generate hope. One might say that a public university creates public hope. It exists as a state investment in the potential of citizens. The continued caretaking of the investment cultivates public confidence in the future.

For those involved in a university enterprise, the function of research and

academic pursuits is to engender hope in future progress. A defining difference between private and public universities is the type of hope created. A private university creates conditional hope. Students and researchers study and work not only to benefit themselves and the public, but also the financial shareholders of the enterprise: the university and its donors. A private university serves private interests. Its outputs must reflect this relationship. This also affects the students produced at private schools. To ensure future financial donations and the sustained reputation of the university, private universities go to great lengths to mold their student bodies. This is one reason why the wealthiest private schools only accept applicants with great promise, and why many of those schools spend massive amounts of money on student life.

A public university creates a different kind of hope, leading to a different kind of intellectual space. People at a public university have more say in the intellectual process. Public universities in theory create unconditional hope. Participants in this enterprise are the primary shareholders in their own future. A completely public university creates conditions where students and researchers are not constrained by systematic dogma. They are therefore free to pursue and achieve dreams outside of the purview of external interests on an individual basis. This mission is egalitarian - so long as they show in their application they will work hard to reach their potential, any student has the opportunity to be accepted to a public school.

Sadly, public universities rarely exist in this ideal form because they are rarely cared for. Like any ignored or maligned investment a public university will fail to achieve its goals if unsupported. There can be little public hope in the future if the primary path to pursuing dreams is too difficult to follow. Confidence in the future requires sustained investment and effort in the present. If the state is to continue helping citizens reach their potential it must find ways to invest in the university.

Sharada Narayan – “You Are Entitled To This Space”

I know exactly how important the ideal of a public university is to me because of the low-grade, percolating anger I feel in my gut whenever I hear about those so-called country-club universities -the kind that build lazy rivers and tour-star resort dorms as bait for applicants with money, but are still, somehow, 'public'. This is an existential kind of rage, a question of rightness and *wrongness*. A strong belief becomes a moral principle: public space is supposed to be for everyone; access shouldn't be a mere obligation at odds with excellence (or financial solvency).

When I walk into a UC Berkeley library, I see students, of course, and faculty members, but also retirees with their newspapers and the homeless with their bags, putting up their feet for once and enjoying the lovely space. I see all kinds of people on this campus, from all kinds of backgrounds, with all kinds of experiences. Some walk through the iconic entrances, like Sather Gate, but many seep through the countless unmarked paths that connect us and root us to the community we represent and serve. This is the image that comes to mind when I think of a public university. This is the image of our obligation, but it isn't a constraint: it is the source of our strength and the meaning we find in the work that we do. Our public institutions are founded on the ideal that we are collectively responsible for our progress, and that the fruits of this progress should

belong to everyone.

Of course, public universities are real, not ideal- we don't have infinite resources. We can't take everyone who has a right to be here, but that doesn't mean they don't have a claim to the university. As an institution, the public university has importance as a symbol of universal education and progress for all, but it's also real public space, and that matters. Knowledge doesn't exist in a campus vacuum; it doesn't stop at the boundary of the student who didn't (or couldn't) jump high enough to clear the admissions hoops, or at the person who never had the opportunity to be a student in the first place. There is a reason for the old cliché that education is light- it has a source, but it can't be contained within itself - it is always radiating outward, touching others, transmitting its energy to the world.

This university is not only for our students, though there are always students, streaming in and streaming out, working, thinking, exploring. It is not only for the faculty and the researchers who brighten our collective reputation and give us something to brag about at family reunions. It is not only for the staff who are chronically underfunded and underappreciated, but tirelessly keep us running all the same. The tour groups, school groups, people walking their dogs- they all come to this university and they all live a piece of their lives here with a perfect sense of entitlement.