James Carville speaks about the ideological shifts in higher education funding.

'Starving the Beast'

New documentary explores the philosophy and players behind cutting state support for higher education.

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By Ellen Wexler

'Starving the Beast' opens with James Carville, a well-known Democratic strategist, standing in front of a crowd at Louisiana State University.

“They say,” he tells the crowd, “education is a commodity.”

By “they,” Carville means the reformers -- an assortment of politicians, think-tank leaders and university administrators who believe that colleges should operate like businesses. That like any other good or service, “It’s a barrel of oil, it’s an ounce of gold, it’s a stock,” he says. “It’s anything.”

The documentary, directed by Steve Mims, premiered this weekend at the South by Southwest film festival in Austin, Texas. Clocking in at 95 minutes, it explores the decline of state funding and the philosophical divide over what kind of a good higher education is. What should taxpayers be expected to support?

“Focusing on the root of it,” Mims said, “that's the real story.”

The film lays out an overview of the debate’s philosophical underpinnings: originally, states saw public colleges as a worthwhile investment in their residents. Poor students could gain useful skills and move up, contributing to their states’ economies. In the early days of public higher education systems, many states charged little if any tuition.

On the other side, there are the reformers and think-tank leaders, the antispending politicians like Bobby Jindals and Grover Norquists. Reformers like Norquist -- founder of Americans for Tax Reform, which famously encourages lawmakers to pledge their support for low taxes -- say that public colleges are an obligation to keep taxes low. The idea, Mims said, “is that the system is broken. That it’s too
For reformers, that means everything from cutting funding to gutting protections that don’t exist in other businesses, like tenured faculty positions.

"Tenure, as utilized by public higher education, is outdated," Wallace Hall, a regent at the University of Texas System, says in the film. "It’s almost universally reviled, and it’s in desperate need of a competitive alternative."

While Mims interviewed several conservative reformers for the film, Hall thought the final product was somewhat slanted in a particular direction, according to the director. "He thought the film was somewhat slanted in a particular direction," Mims said.

But the goal, he added, was to let advocates on both sides speak without interruption. "If you understand the philosophy of the people on both sides of this argument, then everything else flows from that."

The film starts in Texas, where former governor Rick Perry — who appointed Hall — was trying to make a series of policy changes. Created by the think-tank leader Jeff Sandefer, the reforms were designed to treat colleges more like businesses.

Sandefer suggested paying professors based on measures like student evaluations and creating a voucher system that would put money in the hands of students rather than colleges.

“They were so simple,” Sandefer says in the film, “that anybody who ran organizations would course.”

In a similar effort, Texas A&M created the “red and black report,” which chronicled how much money each professor brought into the university.

Originally, Mims focused the project on Texas. He’s an adjunct at the University of Texas at Austin, and for years he had watched the cry for reform at Texas’s public colleges gain traction. Along with producer Bill Banowsky, he began filming committee meetings and sit-down interviews. But as they continued their research, they saw parallel situations playing out across the country.


In Wisconsin, Governor Scott Walker cut millions from state colleges and universities last year. While submitting a draft of his budget, he also removed some language from the state university system’s mission, including the charge
that universities “search for truth” and “improve the human condition.” He quickly called the opponents say the mistake signaled a philosophical shift.

In Louisiana, public colleges faced massive cuts last year, prompting the president of Louisi:
Louisiana colleges face many of the same problems (https://www.insidehighered.com/news
payments-state-grant-program-colleges-pick-slack).

In North Carolina, conservative leaders shut down (https://www.insidehighered.com/news/;
worst—shut-down-center-poverty-led-faculty-member—who—criticizes) University of North
biodiversity, and civic engagement and social change, a move that opponents argued was an

The University of Virginia is the only story in the film that doesn’t quite fit the narrative: the
decided to remove President Teresa Sullivan back in 2012, arguing that her approach wasn’t
But after three weeks of protests, Sullivan was reinstated. It was, for Sullivan’s supporters, a
values, and a victory over a conservative reform agenda.

“The UVa story,” Mims said, “it's the one that sort of has a happy ending.”

For now, Starving the Beast will follow the states it profiles: it will screen at Louisiana State l
later at the Wisconsin Film Festival. Beyond that, Mims is still developing a release strategy.

As the film gains a wider audience, Mims hopes it will help shed light on what he says is one
problems. While many of the academics interviewed were up-to-date on the struggles in the
little part of it” — they seemed unaware of the problem's scale.

But Mims is hopeful that the pushback to the reform agenda will help turn the issue into a n
what made this worthy of being a film is this resistance,” Mims said. Without the resistance, happens at a university, and it's pretty invisible.”

Starving the Beast Trailer
from Steve Mims PRO

02:30

(print/news/2016/03/22/starving-beast-examines-ideological-shifts-funding-higher
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