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

'Starving the Beast'

New documentary explores the philosophy and players behind cutting state support for high

March 22, 2016

By [Ellen Wexler](#)

S*tarving the Beast* opens with James Carville, a well-known Democratic strategist, standing in front of 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 others 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 festival. Clocking in at 95 minutes, it explores the decline of state funding and the philosophical divide over whether good is higher education? 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 viewed higher education as a worthwhile investment in their residents. Poor students could gain useful skills and move up the economic ladder, contributing to their states' economies. In the early days of public higher education systems, states provided free tuition.

On the other side, there are the reformers and think-tank leaders, the antispending politicians like Bobby Jindal and Grover Norquist. Reformers like Norquist -- founder of Americans for Tax Reform -- encourages lawmakers to pledge their support for low taxes -- say that public colleges are not the government's obligation to keep taxes low. The idea, Mims said, "is that the system is broken. That it's too



Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker. Credit: 'Starving the Beast'

For reformers, that means everything from cutting funding to gutting protections that don't tenure.

"Tenure, as utilized by public higher education, is outdated," Wallace Hall, a regent at the University of Texas, said in the film.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 according to the director. "He thought the film was somewhat slanted in a particular direction."

But the goal, he added, was to let advocates on both sides speak without interruption. "If you hear 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 implement changes. Created by the think-tank leader Jeff Sandefer, the reforms were designed to treat professors based on measures like student evaluations and create a merit-based system that 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 have figured it out course."

In a similar effort, Texas A&M created the "red and black report," which chronicled how much money was being put into the university.

Originally, Mims focused the project on Texas. He's an adjunct at the University of Texas at Austin. He watched the cry for reform at Texas's public colleges gain traction. Along with producer Bill Mims, he conducted committee meetings and sit-down interviews. But as they continued their research, they saw similar trends across the country.

Louisiana. North Carolina. Virginia. Wisconsin. "It just became more and more complicated," the film chronicles tensions in all five states.

In Wisconsin, Governor Scott Walker cut millions from state colleges and universities last year. In his budget, he also [removed some language \(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/02/gubernatorial-assault-expansive-view-higher-ed-wisconsin\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/02/gubernatorial-assault-expansive-view-higher-ed-wisconsin) from the state university system.

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 Louisiana State University to call for a [financial exigency \(https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2015/04/23/lsu-prepares-financial-exigency\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2015/04/23/lsu-prepares-financial-exigency). Louisiana colleges [face many of the same problems \(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/payments-state-grant-program-colleges-pick-slack\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/payments-state-grant-program-colleges-pick-slack).

In North Carolina, conservative leaders [shut down \(https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/04/23/nc-wants-shut-down-center-poverty-led-faculty-member-who-criticizes\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/04/23/nc-wants-shut-down-center-poverty-led-faculty-member-who-criticizes) the University of North Carolina's Center for the Study of Life, Biodiversity, and Civic Engagement and Social Change, a move that opponents argued was an attack on academic freedom.

The University of Virginia is the only story in the film that doesn't quite fit the narrative: the university decided to remove President Teresa Sullivan back in 2012, arguing that her approach wasn't consistent with the university's values. But after three weeks of protests, Sullivan was reinstated. It was, for Sullivan's supporters, 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 University 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 of the biggest 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 national conversation. “What made this worthy of being a film is this resistance,” Mims said. “Without the resistance, it doesn't happen at a university, and it's pretty invisible.”



Starving the Beast Trailer

from **Steve Mims** PRO

02:30



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