

SCREENS

Public Education Under Fire

New doc *Starving the Beast* uncovers ideological clash

BY NORA ANKRUM, FRI., MARCH 11, 2016



Austin-based filmmaker Steve Mims' latest documentary, *Starving the Beast: The Battle to Disrupt and Reform America's Public Universities*, is a concise narrative revealing an expansive story about a deepening philosophical divide over education in America. The story is so expansive, in fact, that Mims says it was the hardest thing he's ever had to edit. "We had to take so much out of it," he said. "It was like a plane trying to become airborne, where you keep throwing cargo out of the hold so you can lift off."

The project began in 2011 with a focus on the University of Texas at Austin (where Mims is a lecturer in the Radio-Television-Film Department) and Texas A&M. Both schools were facing political pressure to

fall in line with the ideas of conservative reformers who, in the name of cost-cutting, questioned the value of university research and encouraged evaluating instructors by the money they brought to the school.

Playing out in local headlines at the time, the reform attempts sparked different dramas at each school, but the underlying dilemma was the same: whether to treat students like consumers – as envisioned by conservative groups like the Cato Institute and the American Enterprise Institute – or like citizens, as envisioned by Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Abe Lincoln, whose signature on the 1862 Morrill Act spurred the creation of public universities through land grants.

"The philosophy at the heart of public universities was that the nation would make an investment in these schools all over the country, in the middle of nowhere, so that the people in the states would have a shot at getting an excellent education in an affordable way – and so it was a social good," said Mims. "It's incredible that you'd have a great school like Iowa State in the middle of Iowa. There's not really a reason for that to have happened other than the Morrill Act. ... It remains to be seen if the market would make a place like that."

As Mims discovered, seemingly isolated incidents at public universities around the country – e.g., the dramatic defunding of Louisiana State University and the ousting of presidents at the University of North Carolina and the University of Virginia – were in fact part of the same ideological clash playing out in Texas. "It kind of morphed from one movie into another movie as we did more research," says Mims. "When we went around the country, we ... talked to all these people who knew their part of what was going on, but they weren't really aware of what was happening at the other schools." As a result, the documentary recounts the stories unfolding at several universities and includes interviews with thinkers from around the country representing both sides of the divide.

Although the divide is philosophical, the consequences are tangible. Against a backdrop of skyrocketing student debt and shrinking public funding, the public university model is under threat. On that, both sides agree. Conservative reformer Jeff Sandefer, whose ideas were central to the Texas reform attempts, says in the film: "I do not believe over the long-term that any of the large universities will survive unless they embrace the new realities."

Documentary Spotlight, World Premiere

Starving the Beast: The Battle to Disrupt and Reform America's Public Universities

Sunday, March 13, 7pm, Topfer Theatre

Tuesday, March 15, 7pm, Rollins Theatre

Thursday, March 17, 5:15pm, Marchesa

Saturday, March 19, 11:30am, Alamo South Lamar

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SXSW FILM

Everybody Has Some

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