

SLAY THE DRAGON



Using Strategic Myths to Defeat Austerity in Higher Education

By Taylor Harless

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Union leaders in higher education have dealt with unprecedented challenges since the Great Recession. Before 2008, universities and colleges already faced mounting issues that required extra resources and planning to overcome. However, the cure provided by politicians and university executives to overcome the financial crisis has proven worse than the disease. Austerity policies prescribed massive cuts in financial support from state governments that deprived campuses of resources when they needed them most, and over a decade later, funding still lags behind prerecession levels. Universities generated some new revenues by hiking student tuition and fees, but they have filled the remaining gap by slashing spending on staff and programs. The pressures of COVID-19 have stretched many campuses to the brink of crisis.

Many unions have begun bold campaigns to resist these changes and rebuild their institutions, but they are struggling to build support. The press provides full coverage of talking points from university administration but scant attention to the union's proposals. Allies feel that the time is not right or are unwilling to provide more than moral support. Even direct rebuttals of the arguments leaders present do little to change the momentum. Politicians and university executives are even able to portray the union as a major cause of the problem, accusing them of being naive or selfish for opposing these cuts. Why does it seem that the more extreme their changes are, the harder it is to build opposition to them?

Leaders win support for these policies through the compelling story they tell about them, what I call the **strategic myth of austerity**. This is the story told by decision makers that builds support for budget cuts as the best and only hope to solve problems. While the details differ in every situation, these narratives employ a common set of emotional conclusions based on factual research. Politicians and university executives have told this tale for so long that the general public accepts it as the unvarnished truth.

Unions can overcome this story by writing their own strategic myth, one that introduces reinvestment in higher education as the best solution. This story has the power to turn austerity on its head, showing that the strategy of "cut, cut, cut" created and expanded the problems public universities and colleges face today. By flipping the script, union leaders can provide their members and allies with a powerful lens to view the problems they face and the solution they are

working towards. It will put politicians and university executives on the defensive by detailing their mismanagement of campuses.

This guide will provide union leaders in higher education with the basic tools to change the story by:

- Diagramming the five core elements of the strategic myth of austerity.
- Suggesting best practices for unions to write their own strategic myth of reinvestment.
- Evaluating a case study of a story-driven campaign to fight for funding.

The Growing Storm

Public institutions of higher education face significant financial challenges that were building for decades before COVID-19, including: aging infrastructure, underfunded pension systems, uncapped cost increases in health insurance, and declining numbers of high school graduates.

Politicians and university leaders have turned these challenges into problems, however, by embracing austerity as their solution of choice. Austerity is simple: cut expenditures to match falling revenues. The problem is, these challenges need higher expenditures to solve them, so cutting costs only made the underlying problems worse. University executives created some new revenues by requiring higher tuition and fees from students, but even this failed to bridge the entire gap. Research by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities sheds light on what they term “a lost decade” in funding for public universities and colleges:

- 44 states spent less in 2017 than they did in 2008 per student in their public institutions of higher learning adjusted for inflation.
- Average tuition at four-year public universities and colleges rose an average of 35% from 2008 to 2017.
- This increase in tuition failed to offset funding cuts in half of states from 2008 to 2016.¹

The burden on students is staggering: the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) reports that in 2019, the student share of total education revenues at public universities and colleges was 46 percent in 2019, up from 20.9 percent in 1980.²

1 [*A Lost Decade in Higher Education Funding*](#). Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. August 23, 2017.

2 [*State Higher Education Finance FY 2019 Report*](#). State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO). June 30, 2020.



To close the rest of the gap, decision makers have cut costs through wage freezes, increased benefit contributions, furloughs, and layoffs. The result is that faculty and staff bear more responsibilities while earning less. Slowly, our institutions are losing their ability to meet their mission of public education, yet another example of what R.A.W. Rhodes termed “the hollowing out” of the public sector.

Union leaders in higher education also bear the strain of these changes. Union staff have to divert their focus from other priorities to respond to successive crises. Bargaining unit members and non-members alike are upset and even cynical about the situation, feeling like they lack power to change the status quo after every new announcement or cut. Union officers and staff do their best under these circumstances, but it can feel like the situation controls the union, instead of the union controlling the situation.

Despite this, many education unions have launched campaigns to address these challenges and regain lost ground. In the wake of the *Janus* decision, numerous faculty and staff associations are educating potential members on the value of joining their union. Others are planning major mobilizations for bargaining, public demonstrations, and political action. Many state education associations have drafted progressive tax legislation that will provide new, dedicated sources of funding for public colleges and universities.

The Heart of the Austerity Myth

Making progress in these campaigns often proves challenging, even when the need for change is so manifest. Union members and sympathetic allies waver, believing that it is better to wait and take action later. University executives and political opponents dismiss the union’s proposals as self-interested and naive, and the press repeats those arguments while giving little attention to the union’s perspective.

The problem is not the union’s proposals; it is the story their opponents tell about the problems we face and why austerity is the best solution. Politicians and university executives have honed this powerful narrative over decades, enabling them to make drastic changes in higher education and preempt public opposition.

If you distill down a dozen austerity press releases, you get one generic version of this story:

Due to the recent crisis, we face a major challenge that requires an immediate response. We must take action to protect the interests of our students and the future of this institution. Some people oppose doing what needs to be



done, but they either do not understand the full situation or have put their own interests above others. We make these changes after great consideration and anguish; in fact, we are doing all we can to minimize the impact on those affected. We have chosen to take these steps because they are the most sensible, fair, and effective we have found. Now we must all accept that this difficult course of action is necessary to overcome the problems we face.

Sound familiar? These stories gain strength from the formula of **strategic myths**: stories told by change makers that draw emotional conclusions from supporting research to persuade others to accept and support change. These narratives draw on the human phenomenon of myths and tap into our desire for simple ways of understanding a complex world. They describe realities that allow us to see ourselves as heroes, our opponents as villains, and believe that we are truly capable of solving the problems that exist in the world. These stories can generate belief so powerful that it withstands impassioned opposition, reasoned criticism, and even wholesale debunking of these conclusions.

Three key features of the strategic myth of austerity protect it from efforts to oppose it. First, the austerity myth is holistic: it provides a simple, comprehensive way to understand a complex and bewildering situation. Second, the story is positive: it describes the things that are, instead of what they are not. Third, the austerity myth is credible: it has become widely accepted as true and taps into larger political myths, such as the belief that “public institutions should run like businesses.”

There are five strands of the strategic myth of austerity, each with similar ingredients: they present select facts to build credibility with the listener, from which they draw subjective conclusions that are linked to powerful emotions. These unite to create a strand in the overall story. To explain the role each plays, I have linked these threads to an iconic archetype from legends.

There are five strands of the strategic myth of austerity:

- **The Dragon**: the challenge we face.
- **The Village**: the stakes we may lose.
- **The Dark Knight**: the enemies who oppose the solution.
- **The White Knight**: the heroes who work towards the solution.
- **The Magic Wand**: The solution that will save us.



Let's examine the elements of the strategic myth of austerity in closer detail.



The Dragon

The challenge we face

Talking Point

“Due to the recent crisis, we face a major challenge that requires an immediate response.”

Supporting Research

Shortfalls in state tax revenues, gaps in state and university budget, declining demographic and enrollment data, funding gap for state pension system, the university's debt load.

Emotional Conclusions

The Dragon conveys a challenge that is **urgent, important, and big**. It grabs the attention of everyone that the storytellers want to convince. They often portray this problem as the manifestation of larger, impersonal forces, such as COVID-19 or budget problems, to absolve the storytellers of any blame for the situation.



The Village

The stakes we may lose

Talking Point

“We must take action to protect the interests of our students and the future of this institution.”

Supporting Research

The annual amount of tuition assistance at stake, national rankings for the university and its programs.

Emotional Conclusions

The storytellers describes the university as a Village that is **vulnerable** to the threat of the Dragon. The Village contains something **precious** that could be lost forever if the challenge is not dealt with. These stakes are personified by **innocent** Villagers, such as students, who are unable to save themselves without help.





The Dark Knights

The enemies who oppose the solution

Talking Point

“Some people oppose doing what needs to be done, but they either do not understand the full situation or have put their own interests above others.”

Supporting Research

The union’s public record, including bargaining proposals, press releases, staff salaries, political contributions, and policy positions.

Emotional Conclusions

When opposition to their plan arises, the storytellers describe their opponents as The Black Knight who can do no good. These foes, often the union and its allies, present organized opposition and even credible alternatives to the plan. The storytellers work to portray them as **bad, wrong, or naive**. The goal is to discredit them and prevent their objections and alternative proposals from appearing legitimate.





The White Knights

The heroes who work towards the solution

Talking Point

“We make these changes after great consideration and anguish; in fact, we are doing all we can to minimize the impact on those affected.”

Supporting Research

Alternative policies they have considered, accommodations they are making to ease changes, the emotional cost they have personally incurred during this process.

Emotional Conclusions

The storytellers portray themselves and their allies as virtuous White Knights who are **reluctant**, **selfless**, and **compassionate**. They are dutifully doing what needs to be done, at great personal cost, while trying to minimize the pain their actions cause. Their goal is build sympathy from the listener and rebuff any criticism of their choices.





The Magic Wand

*The solution that will
save us*

Talking Point	“Now we must all accept that this difficult course of action is necessary to overcome the problems we face.”
Supporting Research	Their chosen austerity policies: layoffs, furloughs, reductions, program cuts.
Emotional Conclusions	The storyteller final presents their preferred Solution as a Magic Wand. They describe these changes as the most logical , fair , and beneficial they could find. The storyteller will often present a silver lining, such as increased need-based student aid, that the Magic Wand will enable, showing something positive will come of difficult actions.

Images courtesy of Game-icons.net

Together, these threads support the conclusion that austerity policies are **necessary** and **inevitable** solve the problem. This is a powerful accomplishment, seeing as we know austerity policies are actually gratuitous and arbitrary. University executives often reinforce the feeling of inevitability by initiating changes while they’re announcing them, creating the perception of a *fait accompli*. This is enough to discourage many from taking action to resist these changes. However, for union leaders ready to fight back, this is only the beginning.

Fighting Back for Reinvestment

The common goal of all union campaigns in public higher education should be reinvestment: allocating more resources to the core goal of educating students. Reinvestment can take many forms across campuses and states, such as rehiring any staff who have been laid off, restoring cut programs, and raising state contributions to campus budgets.

Regardless of their form, reinvestment campaigns can benefit from pursuing the three key features of the austerity myth: **holistic**, **positive**, and **credible**.

- The campaign becomes **holistic** when it presents an urgent, important problem where reinvestment is the best solution.



- The campaign becomes **positive** when it spends more time describing how reinvestment will solve the problems universities face instead of attacking the shortcomings of the status quo.
- The campaign becomes **credible** when it presents the right emotional narratives and supporting research to earn buy-in from key groups.

Becoming viewed as credible is the most difficult feat for a reinvestment campaign to achieve. Authority figures have consistently repeated the austerity myth for decades so it has become well-established. Any campaign that critiques it faces an uphill battle.

The strongest strategy to overcome this head start is to create a new strategic myth: the myth of reinvestment. This can follow the same form as the myth of austerity and incorporate the same five core elements described above. Here are some key differences to consider:

- **The Dragon:** University executives who use the strategic myth of austerity want to contain the scope of their challenges to their campus to prevent blowback on their political superiors in state government. Expanding the story to include state government and politics is a powerful way to reframe the problem.
- **The Village:** Decision makers are largely isolated from the day-to-day problems of students. Yet faculty and staff know that their students are suffering right now more than ever. Many struggle with poverty and homelessness, while others remain important breadwinners for their families while completing their education. Sharing personal stories about these students is as valid as reams of quantitative data and can often capture the truth of the situation even better.
- **The Dark Knights:** Reframing politicians and university executives from heroic White Knights to rogue Black Knights will take extra effort due to reasons of long-standing credibility discussed above. It isn't necessary to draw definitive conclusions about their actions; it is adequate to raise legitimate questions supported by fact and let listeners make up their own minds.
- **The White Knights:** It is tempting to describe faculty and staff as innocent Villagers who are under attack. But while educators have borne many of the costs of these policies, framing the story this way makes could make them look selfish or mercenary. It is more effective to instead present them as the selfless actions of the White Knight working to find a solution to the problem.
- **The Magic Wand:** Successful strategic myths seldom refer to other arguments. It is often more effective to focus on drawing new emotional conclusions or presenting new



evidence instead of debunking your opposition's story.

Case Study

This section will present one possible response to a plausible scenario: imagine a state where the flagship public university system has faced mounting financial challenges over the past decade. The current governor has compounded these problems by not requesting adequate funding for the university from the legislature to cover the cost increases of the collective bargaining agreements for the past five years. The system has had to make do with less funding, largely by increasing student tuition and fees. The arrival of COVID-19 has hit the system hard: dozens of staff have been laid off with the possibility of more layoffs and program cuts in the future. These cuts are despite the steady funding guarantee the legislature has provided to the university through the duration of the crisis.

The state education association is coordinating with the faculty union locals on each campus to plan a campaign to end these layoffs immediately and fight for a permanent source of dedicated funding. The campaign is multi-pronged: a massive mobilization effort among members on different campuses; a media ad buy to build political and community support for public higher education; and a legislative campaign to pass a bill for dedicated funding.

Through research and planning, the state education union creates this narrative for their campaign for reinvestment:

The vulnerability of our state's flagship public university during the COVID-19 crisis is due to a decade of underfunding and cuts to faculty and programs. As tuition climbs, we are dangerously close to failing to provide an affordable and quality education to any qualifying student from our state. This is no accident: the governor has underfunded our system, appointed unqualified political allies to board positions, and supported risky privatization and real estate schemes. Faculty and staff have made great sacrifices to help, but they must now ask for urgent support for their institution and their students. A new tax on high-income individuals will create a permanent solution to fully fund core education programs and fulfill our promise to students and taxpayers.



This story is girded by the structure and emotional notes of a strategic narrative:



The Dragon • *The challenge we face*

Talking Point	“The vulnerability of our state’s flagship public university during the COVID-19 crisis is due to a decade of underfunding and cuts to faculty and programs.”
Supporting Research	State revenue shortfalls, budget gaps, declining demographic and enrollment data, pension underfunding, high debt load.
Emotional Conclusions	The university is at a breaking point: its needs are greater than ever, while state support has been cut.



The Village • *The stakes we may lose*

Talking Point	“As tuition climbs, we are dangerously close to failing to provide an affordable and quality education to any qualifying student from our state.”
Supporting Research	Average student debt load after graduation, statistics on student homelessness and poverty, changes in student tuition and fees since the Great Recession, changes in state <i>per capita</i> funding in the past decade, average class size.
Emotional Conclusions	The core mission of public education, to educate every qualified student at an affordable cost, has disappeared. Students struggle with massive amounts of debt, while dealing with poverty and even homelessness to complete their degrees. The university has cut services to a bare minimum, leaving educators unable to give students the additional support they need.





The Dark Knights • *The enemies who oppose the solution*

Talking Point	“This is no accident: the governor has underfunded our system, appointed unqualified political allies to board positions, and supported risky privatization and real estate schemes.”
Supporting Research	<p>Comparison of governor’s recent budget requests to actual projections of fixed university expenses.</p> <p>Investigative research on individual board member and university executives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The governor has stacked state education board and university board of trustees with charter school advocates and real estate developers who backed his campaign.• Numerous board members have financial interests in the university’s activities, including owning tens of millions of dollars worth of university bonds.• University executives have crossed back and forth to private companies that have financial dealings with the university. <p>Analysis of key university procurement and real estate contracts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• They have privatized numerous university activities and facilities through public-private partnerships that provide only small financial benefits to the university’s bottom line, while cutting quality to students.• The university has used debt financing to acquire two massive tracts of real estate for speculative purposes, instead of focusing on rehabilitating its aging physical infrastructure.
Emotional Conclusions	The politicians and education executives entrusted to implement this mission have failed due to conflicts of interest, mismanagement, and shortsightedness. Decision makers have cultivated the appearance of conflicts of interest at every level of university governance, while university executives have pursued failed initiatives to change the institution’s direction.





The White Knights • *The heroes who work towards the solution*

Talking Point	“Faculty and staff have made great sacrifices to help, but they must now ask for urgent support for their institution and their students.”
Supporting Research	Number of faculty and staff positions eliminated through attrition or layoffs, comparison of recent salary increases to inflation and cost of living in the region, statistics on number of classes and programs offered and average class size.
Emotional Conclusions	Educators and staff trusted politicians and university executives to do the right thing, but we have only seen the situation get worse. We have made numerous financial concessions and taken on much more work to help bear the load. However, we see the struggles of our students in and out of the class, and we can no longer hope that our leaders will adequately address the problems that cause them pain.



The Magic Wand • *The solution that will save us*

Talking Point	“A new tax on high-income individuals will create a permanent solution to fully fund core education programs and fulfill our promise to students and taxpayers.”
Supporting Research	Discussion of programs that can be saved or expanded with additional funding, analysis of macroeconomic benefits to expanding education spending during an economic recession.
Emotional Conclusions	<p>A decade of cuts and ‘silver bullets’ solutions has left the university adrift and threatening to sink. The simplest solution is reinvestment: dedicating new streams of tax revenue from a millionaires tax.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not everyone is paying their fair share to support an institution that has been a stepping stone to the middle class for generations. • Investment in education is a proven way to recover from economic recession. <p>These new sources of revenue will not only start to repair these institutions; they will advance programs for affordability and allow innovative courses of study to keep graduates competitive.</p>



Conclusion

This case study may sound realistic because it is based on a recent 3-month collaboration between the Education Union Lab and a leading state education association. That organization had experience running high-profile public campaigns in their state and had won numerous victories at the bargaining table and in the legislature. However, they lacked the staff capacity to research the state's flagship university system. Education Union Lab partnered with them to provide comprehensive analysis of the university's leaders and programs.

The collaboration produced more than research facts and figures, though: these strands combined to explain both the situation and solution simply. Members have a story they can share while organizing co-workers to take action. The press can cover the campaign more easily due to the union's supporting research and by presenting a new angle on the traditional 'labor vs. management' dynamic. Politicians and education executives begin to lose momentum, having to defend to their track record as decision makers. Finally, union leaders have a robust central story that can drive their campaign for years to come, but which is flexible enough to adapt to changes in strategy.

Quality research wins union campaigns. However, information is only as useful as the story it can tell. As your union plans its next steps in this uncertain time, make you sure you have the support you deserve to turn back the austerity agenda.

About Taylor



Taylor Harless is a strategic researcher and the principal of Education Union Lab LLC, an independent research firm supporting union leaders in K-12 and higher education. Since 2011, he has created in-depth analysis and breakthrough strategies to help fight for funding, prevent layoffs, and win strong contracts.

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