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Higher Education or Education for Hire? Corporatization and the Threat to Democratic Thinking



Teaching critical thinking is the university's democratic mission, argues the University of Ottawa's Joel Westheimer, and today's universities are failing to deliver. Universities need to reverse the trend that has them focusing on workforce preparation and the commercialization of knowledge and resurrect higher education's public purpose.

by Joel Westheimer

TEN YEARS ago, I was fired, which is not in and of itself interesting. After all, many people lose their jobs every day, especially in times of economic turbulence. For better or worse, however, most endure such indignity in privacy. The *New York*

Times, under the headline "New York University Denied Tenure to Union Backer," reported that the U.S. government's National Labor Relations Board "charge[d] New York University with illegally denying tenure to a professor who had testified in favor of allowing graduate students to unionize."

The Chronicle of Higher Education headline read “A Promising Professor Backs a Union Drive and Is Rejected for Tenure.” Smaller papers and magazines made similar observations. I was more concerned at the time with wanting my job back than with thinking about the broader implications (the cacophony of negative publicity heaped on NYU offered a sense of just deserts to be sure). But thrust into the public position as I was did raise one particular concern for my scholarly interests in democratic education. Nearly every news story cast my lot as an isolated incident of vengeful retribution by a few university administrators rather than as a case of something much larger than one professor (me) or one university (NYU).

For the past 10 years I have been happily employed by the University of Ottawa and I am pleased to report that my children have not gone hungry. But whether others view my earlier dismissal as scandalous or justified, I find the following irrefutable: the forces that set the process in motion and enabled it to continue are an inevitable byproduct of dramatic changes the academy has been facing in the past several decades. These changes have little to do with individual university employees and much to do with changes in the structures and workings of the academy itself – not only NYU, but also private and public universities across the United States and Canada. Universities now model themselves after corporations seeking to maximize profit, growth, and marketability. As a result, the democratic mission of the university as a public good has all but vanished. And many of the (never fully realized) ideals of academic life – academic freedom (in my case, freedom of political expression), intellectual independence, collective projects, and pursuit of the common good – have been circumscribed or taken off the table altogether on a growing number of college and university campuses across North America.

The effects of corporatization on the integrity of university research – especially in the sciences – has been well-documented elsewhere. Readers of *Academic Matters* are likely familiar with the many cases of scientific compromise resulting from private commercial sponsorship of research by pharmaceutical and tobacco companies. Indeed, faculty throughout North America are already deluged with requests or demands to produce research that is “patentable” or “commercially viable.” Sometimes these entreaties are couched in gentler (some might argue more insidious) terms such as “knowledge mobilization” or “knowledge use.” What I want to focus on here, however, are implications that are less well explored but equally dangerous: the ways the academy’s shift towards a business model of education delivery impedes our collective ability to preserve and promote a democratic way of life. As in so many other arenas in our society today where democratic interests are pitted against economic ones, democracy seems to be losing.

Three developments stemming from the pursuit of a corporate model of education pose threats not only to the historic ideal of a liberal democratic education but also to the future of democratic

thinking itself. They are the elimination of critical thinking and a culture of criticism; the weakening of intellectual independence and democratic faculty governance; and the promotion of a meritocracy myth that drives the work of graduate students, junior and senior faculty alike. The first two erode democratic thinking by curbing the habits of mind and heart that enable democracy to flourish – what John Dewey called the “associated experience[s]” essential to democratic life. The last – the meritocracy myth – attacks the heart of these associated experiences by diminishing the power of the community to nurture collective meaning and worth.

The impact of the corporate campus on critical thinking

Within the unique university context, the most crucial of all human rights...are meaningless unless they entail the right to raise deeply disturbing questions and provocative challenges to the cherished beliefs of society at large and of the university itself...It is this human right to radical, critical teaching and research with which the University has a duty above all to be concerned; for there is no one else, no other institution and no other office, in our modern liberal democracy, which is the custodian of this most precious and vulnerable right of the liberated human spirit.

This excerpt from the mission statement of the University of Toronto might be hailed as a shining example of the centrality of university campuses in promoting and preserving critical thinking as the engine of progress in any democratic society. Except for one thing: institutional leaders at the university whose faculty drafted these words do not believe them and do not abide by them. The University of Toronto is the site of two of the most notoriously blatant violations of these principles in the past decade: the well-publicized cases of Nancy Olivieri and David Healy, involving the university’s unwillingness to stand up to corporate funders and protect academic freedom and the integrity of critical inquiry.

Unfortunately, the Olivieri and Healy cases do not stand alone. Scores of examples of scientific and social scientific research essential to public welfare are undermined by private influence. In fact, more than 52 per cent of funding for clinical medical research is now from corporate sources. The trend is easiest to spot and most publicly alarming in the medical sciences, since lives are at stake. But there is cause for concern as well in the humanities and social sciences, where publication of inconvenient truths can be discouraged by university higher-ups.

The harm to the reputation of the university as a reliable source of (especially “scientific”) information untainted by private conflicts of interest has been documented extensively. But the ways these changes affect the campus life of faculty and students has been considered far less. As universities turn to business models– becoming certification factories rather than institutions of higher learning – democratic educational ideals are fast becoming obsolete. Consequently,

professors find it more difficult in their teaching to foster critical thinking as a necessary underpinning of democratic participation. The “shopping mall” university where students seek the cheapest and fastest means for obtaining the basic skills and certification they need is becoming a familiar metaphor and model for university administrators, students, and parents. Courses not directly related to job-training look more and more like useless dust to be eliminated. Meetings among faculty about which program of courses might yield the most robust understanding of a field of study and of the debates and struggles that field entails are rapidly being replaced by brainstorming sessions about how to narrow the curriculum to fit into, for example, two weekends in order to *incentivize* matriculation and increase student enrollment.

The weakening of intellectual independence and democratic faculty governance

The state of affairs I describe above pertains mostly to the emaciated pedagogical potential of the newly corporatized university. But ultimately, what faculty—and especially junior faculty—are being asked to give up is their own intellectual independence. The creeping corporate climate of some university departments and schools can easily lead to the substitution of bureaucratic allegiance, in the form of “budget alignment” or “optimization” in the new parlance, for scholarly inquiry as the cornerstone of academic life. In some cases, the effect on the intellectual life of a department might be plain to see. In some schools and faculties, elected department chairs—who traditionally served terms of a few years and then eagerly returned to their intellectual pursuits within the department—have been replaced by chairs *appointed* by university higher-ups with no or at best perfunctory input from department faculty. Some stay in these positions for a decade or more with ever-diminishing interest in or focus on scholarly inquiry. In the *Social Text* article, “Tenure Denied,” (where I described more fully my experiences at NYU), I told of a colleague at a mid-western university whose department chair suggested to the faculty that research questions that the department wanted investigated should be agreed on by a committee (of senior faculty and administrators) and posted on a Web site—and that faculty should align their research with one of those questions. Requiring research to be streamlined according to central criteria (doubtless related to funding opportunities) makes perfect sense if one treats an academic department as a profit center. But it turns scholarly life into something less than we all hope it to be.

At times, the mere fact that departmental faculty are pursuing an active, diverse and uncontrolled set of research agendas may be perceived negatively by school administrators. While such departments continue to recruit promising scholars on the basis of their research production, the departmental leadership is caught in a bind. They need such scholars for the department's reputation and grant-getting ability, but once there, these scholars may pose some threat to the order of business within the department (and to the security of the chair who has likely already traded the kind of professional security earned from scholarly inquiry and production for the kind

won by allegiance and loyalty to university higher-ups).

Appointed chairs can slowly and steadily shift faculty focus from scholarly pursuits that advance a field to those that advance the chair, a possibility especially troubling to junior faculty seeking tenure. Much as external pressures on the corporate university constrain and refocus academic research, so too do internal incentives on the departmental level. As in much of university politics, junior faculty are the most vulnerable. Faculty governance in departments that have remade themselves along corporate culture lines can become little more than a parody of pseudo-democratic (or simply non-democratic) governance, in which faculty simply (and always) endorse administrative positions. Faculty managers' and department chairs' only convictions are those that do not ruffle administrative feathers of those higher up. And the chill that blankets departments in which power has been centralized results in the further entrenchment of anti-democratic tendencies.

Under these conditions, the university starts to look less like a place of free exchange of ideas and more like a Hobbesian Leviathan, a place that boasts, as former SUNY New Paltz president Roger Bowen warns, "a settled, conforming, obedient citizenry—not dissenters who challenge convention." In these departments, junior faculty either conform or withdraw from departmental life after being tenured. The bottom line is raised to the top. Research that promotes the financial and hierarchical health of the administration is rewarded while independent scholarly thought is punished. Institutions of higher education become ones of education for hire. Undue administrative influence over research agendas, appointed department chairs and the further erosion of democratic governance, and the hiring of part-time and clinical faculty with no time for scholarly inquiry and little job security are all threats to both critical inquiry and university democracy.

Before moving on to my final point, I want to point out that these conditions are created not only by university administration but also by a complicit faculty who would rather not sacrifice research time to engage in something as time-consuming as democratic governance. In other words, a repressive hierarchy is not required for non-democratic decision-making to flourish. Were university administrators to honour democratic faculty governance fully, would faculty step up to the plate? Under a corporate model of governance, appointed department chairs may stay in their positions for a decade or more. A democratic model, however, would require those deeply engaged in scholarship and research to be willing (or required) to take on leadership positions in administration, in addition to their roles as teacher and scholar. Countering an increasingly hierarchical and corporatized model of university governance requires commitments of time and energy that many faculty now shun but that a just workplace requires.

The corporate benefits of the meritocracy myth

One final characteristic of the newly corporatized campus I want to address is the complicity of the professorial (and graduate student) culture. The pervasive culture of increasing individualism results in a story we tell ourselves that goes something like this: “We work in a merit-based system. If I do my job correctly — if I’m a good graduate student or a good professor and I’m smart and I do my work well — I will be rewarded with a plum teaching assignment, and I will be part of the academic elite and get a job.” This is an unfortunate state of affairs for two reasons. The first is economic and concerns the entrenched system of academic labour. The simple reality is that for the majority of disciplines, the claim that the system is merit-based is just not true. There are vastly more qualified, hardworking individuals than there are tenure-track and tenured academic positions for them to fill. At a certain level of proficiency, it becomes the luck of the draw.

But the second cost of an emphasis on individualism in the form of the meritocracy myth might be more insidious. Faculty focused only on individualized measures of professional success miss out on the collective action that has an extensive history in democratic societies and that has sustained and driven countless scholars, artists, scientists, and activists: working together towards a common end. Merit-based rewards encourages faculty to work behind office doors, estranged from colleagues. As Marc Bousquet points out in his book, *How the University Works*, believing in the fantasy of merit results in a great loss to everyone, including those dubbed meritorious.

The corporate university, on the other hand, advances and benefits from the illusion that each of us will attain rock-star status in the academy. Some readers might recall the episode of the television show *West Wing* when fictional President Jeb Bartlett explains why Americans seem to vote against their own interests by protecting a tax system that benefits only the super rich. “It doesn’t matter if most voters don’t benefit,” he explains, “They all believe that someday they will. That’s the problem with the American dream. It makes everyone concerned for the day they’re going to be rich.” And so it goes for the star system in the academy. The more graduate students and professors believe that their hopes for professional satisfaction lies in superstar recognition for their individual work rather than in collective meaning-making and action, the easier it is for democratic life in the university to be compromised.

Conclusion

The language of individual entrepreneurship has become all-pervasive across many sectors of society. It has, therefore, become increasingly difficult for faculty, administrators, students, and public officials even to talk about the public role of universities in a democratic society. This was not always the case. Universities in Canada, as elsewhere, were founded on ideals of knowledge and service *in the public interest*. Universities had a noble mission – if not always fulfilled – to create

knowledge and foster learning that would serve the public good and contribute to the social welfare. Academic workers at all levels and of all kinds need to fight to regain this central mission. What is the role of the university in fostering civic leadership, civic engagement, and social cohesion? How can education re-invigorate democratic participation? How can colleges and universities strengthen our communities and our connections to one another?

I sometimes ask my education students to consider how schools in a democratic society should differ from those in a totalitarian nation. It seems plausible that a good lesson in chemistry or a foreign language might seem equally at home in many parts of the world. Every nation wants its educational institutions to prepare students for active participation in the workforce. So what would be different about teaching and learning in a Canadian classroom than in a classroom in a country governed by a one-ruling-party dictatorship? Most of us would like to believe that schools in a democratic nation would foster the skills and dispositions needed to participate fully in democratic life; namely, the ability to think critically and carefully about social policies, cultural assumptions and, especially, relations of power. Many schoolteachers and university professors, however, are concerned that students are learning more about how to please authority and secure a job than how to develop democratic convictions and stand up for them.

There are many powerful ways to teach young adults to think critically about social policy issues, participate in authentic debate over matters of importance, and understand that people of good will can have different opinions. Indeed democratic progress depends on these differences. If universities hope to strengthen democratic society, they must resist focusing curriculum and research on skills-training, workforce preparation, and the commercialization of knowledge to the benefit of private industry. They must instead participate in the rebuilding of a public purpose for education. How to do so is a matter of professorial imagination.

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