

The Unintended Decentering of Teaching and Learning

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Published online: 25 March 2011
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Once upon a time in a land not so far away, higher education was a public good and state colleges and universities were virtually free. Students paid for books and fees. When a school was far from home, they also paid for room and board. By 1970, admission at some colleges was quite competitive.

Over the years, I have heard colleagues talk about a golden age, when the City University of New York did not charge tuition—not the 1920s and 30s, when City College was the school of choice for future Nobel laureates, but the 1960s and early 70s, when academically striving and upwardly mobile second-generation Americans headed to City, Brooklyn, Hunter and Queens Colleges. “I never could have gone to college if Brooklyn weren’t free,” said one social scientist, who had been reared in a housing project. “Hunter cost \$100 in fees and even that was a lot for me,” a daughter of Latino immigrants, told me. Each emphasized that she was able to go to college, because the City University of New York did not charge tuition.

The financing of higher education is quite different now; so is the meaning of a college degree. Today, it is defined as a private good. Also, as students’ costs have escalated and the state has paid less, there have been serious unintended consequences. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa have provided a great service by identifying some of them in *Academically Adrift*. They tell us, “Neoliberal policy makers who have advocated for increased privatization and market-based educational reforms have produced a system that has expanded opportunity for all. What

conservative policy makers have missed, however, is that market-based educational reforms that elevate the role of students as ‘consumers’ do not necessarily yield improved outcomes in terms of student learning” (2011: 137). Instead, their data indicate, students spend less time studying and also less time studying alone. At every sort of higher-education institution—selective and non-selective, public and private—they are learning less than students did twenty years ago. Furthermore, the gap between the educational accomplishments of rich and poor undergraduates and also the gulf between those of whites and underrepresented minorities is growing.

I believe that the privatization of higher education explicit in current neoliberal financial arrangements has encouraged educational institutions to imitate corporations, the professoriate to behave like ambitious entrepreneurs (many of whom are often oblivious to the undergraduates populating their classrooms, lecture halls and labs), and students to act like consumers intent on receiving “elaborate and ever-expanding services” (p. 15). These include dormitory suites with kitchens, mall-like student unions with food courts, as well as fitness centers replete with the latest elliptical exercisers, and even Olympic pools. Additionally, the transformation of higher education has introduced an *accountability regime*—a politics of surveillance, control, and market management disguising itself as the value-neutral and scientific administration of individuals and organizations. It has not served well either the faculty or the students.

My argument draws on data gathered at the pseudonymous Wannabe University, a rather typical northern flagship university with over 20,000 students where I conducted participant observation for over six years. (I named it Wannabe University, because it satisfies the characteristics listed by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*; to wit, ambition to be a national university, aspirations to

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increase its national ranking, increased funding of famous faculty and expanded construction, self-identification as an economic engine for its region, a slick advertising campaign about its potential greatness, and dreams of becoming the next Silicon Valley.)

I talked about City University of New York, because its history captures the national pattern. Initially it did not charge tuition and it was the first university system to announce open admission—anyone graduating in the top half of a New York high school could attend a four-year college and any graduate could enroll at a community college. It even committed itself to remediation at all of its campuses; as a result, underprepared students swarmed to CUNY. Initially more whites than underrepresented minorities reaped the benefits, according to David Lavin, Richard Alba and Richard Silberstein's now classic *Right versus Privilege: The Open University Experiment at the City University of New York*, though the media continued to say that the open admissions policy was aimed at the city's underrepresented minorities. In 1975, when bankruptcy threatened the city, CUNY was forced to abandon its expensive idealistic policies and instead became one of the first universities to adopt the neoliberal policies of expanded admissions, increased tuition, and decreased public funding. (By the new century, it had discontinued remedial programs at the senior campuses.) Public higher education was no longer to be defined as a public good.

Wannabe U has also responded to neoliberal pressures, albeit more subtle ones. Here are two of the many reasons that it has joined the competition to satisfy the student consumerism that is now rampant in higher education. Increasingly, both federal and state governments have turned from financing institutions to financing students. Although some programs introduced in the 1970s, such as Pell Grants and New York State's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), subsidize the needy rather than the affluent, they nonetheless embody the neoliberal emphasis. By funding students, not institutions, they inadvertently decrease institutional control; bluntly, such programs push students to decide where they will spend their tuition dollars and leave colleges to figure out how to attract them. (These programs also regulated how many remedial courses funded students could take and so contributed to the turn-of-the-century demise of remedial education at CUNY's senior colleges.) Simultaneously, decreased state financing has forced colleges and universities to raise their own funds, to engage in what (in the book of the same name) Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades call "academic capitalism." Responding to these and other financial pressures, colleges have constituted themselves as competing brands. Not only does one college play Coca Cola to another's Pepsi (many colleges' viewbooks include pictures of their gleaming fitness centers as if flaunting their superiority in

the latest taste test); but also both Coke and Pepsi will pay a university over \$1,000,000 to be the only firm whose soft drinks are sold on campus.

During the past decades, a double movement has been occurring within educational institutions. Teaching matters less. In the late 1930s, when Clark Kerr was studying economics at Berkeley, the professors with the most prestige were the best teachers. After World War II, the expansion of the National Institutes of Health, the establishment of the National Science Foundation, and even the redirection of private foundations to tackle national priorities led higher education to emphasize research. When the American Association of University Professors had pressed for the institution of tenure in 1915, it had intended to protect free speech so as to promote classroom inquiry and debate. By 1960, after the expansion of the funding agencies and universities' identification of research as a revenue stream, tenure had become a reward for the production of scholarship. Today, the professors with the most prestige are the publishers and grant-getters; at some research universities, many faculty members pay so much attention to the prestige garnered by scholarship that they don't even know who the best teachers are. Kerr himself put it this way: "There appears to be a point of no return...after which research, consulting and graduate instruction become so absorbing that faculty efforts can no longer be concentrated on undergraduate instruction as they once were" (quoted in Tobin 255). When some major public universities receive as little as 8% of their general fund from their legislature and so must scrounge for monies, teaching is decentered. When most students think that the only purpose of education is to get a diploma that yields a job, students will be "academically adrift," to use Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's term, and their learning will be decentered, too.

Like the undergraduates in Arum and Roksa's study, Wannabe University's students have also come to define college in social and occupational terms rather than as an opportunity to explore intellectual possibilities. One can chart how Wannabe's evolution has affected them. In 1970, Wannabe University was free, too. As costs rose, well-prepared upper-middle class students left for more prestigious pastures until the state legislature decried the brain drain resulting from Wannabe's identity as a safety school. (As at CUNY, potential applicants seemed to think that since they were paying, they might as well aim for a more selective school. Wannabe U became the place for good in-state students to go if they couldn't get in elsewhere.) To attract better students, Wannabe U bought them. In the 1990s, it instituted special merit scholarships for salutarians and valedictorians, though it continued to award funds to those in need. It entered the "amenities race": it built dormitories with suites; it revised cafeteria menus; it emphasized sports.

And, like other higher-education institutions, it pushed its professoriate, especially its science faculty, to accumulate grants and contracts and, as provided by the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980, to patent their findings whenever possible.

By the 1990s and early twenty-first century, when Wannabe U expressed a serious commitment to the national push for better classroom teaching, its instructors had already responded to the nation's neoliberal emphasis on research. As had professors elsewhere, they had embraced research as the path to professional prestige and personal success. Wan U encouraged them to do so. Especially at the research universities, many scholars looked at undergraduate teaching with condescension. Their employers also encouraged them to do so. Needing money, colleges and universities could not abandon the emphasis on funded research.

A new doctrine of professional responsibility and more detailed merit forms to assess individual accomplishments were among the policies that increased the accountability of tenure-line faculty and encouraged professors to audit themselves. They were to monitor the expansion of the lists of publications and grants on their curriculum vitae much as they weighed themselves in the morning. Even as Wannabe's central administrators initiated programs to increase student retention and graduation rates, it pushed faculty to tackle more funded research. "Non-instructional staff" ran those new programs, not professors. One ex-dean claimed that it was easier to fire non-instructional staff if a program did not work out. Moreover, the academic departments were to attract and create potential revenue streams. (The School of Agriculture taught horse-back riding in the summer and even marketed its campus-made ice cream.) Advising one another of the experiences on their end of campus, scientists told humanists, "If you think that the people in the humanities feel pressure, you should see what it's like in the sciences."

At Wan U, as elsewhere, research had trumped teaching. As I describe in *Wannabe U: Inside the Corporate University*, both central administrators and departments placed so much emphasis on scholarship, especially funded research, that sometimes they even construed instructing undergraduates as a punishment. At Wannabe, as elsewhere, professors who do not produce enough scholarship are assigned to teach more courses than their well-published or well-funded colleagues. Four-year colleges mimic the universities. Although their faculties are not expected to devote as much time and effort to scholarship, research matters—both to bring in needed monies and to garner prestige. At such prestigious colleges as Wellesley, Hamilton, and Vassar, publishers are more likely than acclaimed teachers to be distinguished professors and to hold named chairs.

I read the recent histories of both CUNY and Wannabe University, as well as Arum and Roksa's *Academically*

Adrift, as stories about the unintended consequences of neoliberalism. No one had meant the stress on research and consumerism to diminish teaching; but one can trace the processes by which it did so. Neoliberalism encouraged the introduction of corporate management techniques, especially of what Michael Power has called the new managerialism—an emphasis on efficiency, effectiveness, and economy. In higher education, the new managerialism was to be achieved in part by

- the centralization of authority in the staff of presidents and provosts,
- the introduction of vision statements, mission statements, and business plans ("An academic plan is simply a business plan," one Wannabe president informed "his" faculty),
- an emphasis on hiring non-instructional staff to provide the services that choosy students were demanding, and so the hiring of fewer full-time instructors, and thus
- a shift to at-will instructors who could not even pretend to have a say in the governance of their departments, let alone the university. (Currently only 35% of faculty are tenured (25%) or tenure-track (10%) instructors; the rest, the contingent faculty, are mainly adjuncts who commute from one college to another to earn a meager living.

The power of the accountability regime helps to explain many professors' disenchantment with teaching. As I describe in *Wannabe U*, the new managerialism introduced significant changes in work conditions without consulting the professoriate (the workers). Under the guise of investing their assets wisely, deans and central administrators encouraged some forms of research, but not others. They played an increasingly active role in establishing how research should and would be conducted at their institution. Sometimes they assumed the right to define the appropriate parameters of scholarly fields. Small wonder that many full-time professors grew disheartened, almost inert, and that previously peaceful academic departments experienced significant conflict, while departments in which faculty had frequently squabbled were virtually rent asunder. And how are the adjuncts running from job to job supposed to be dedicated to their students and institutions, when many have little contact with one another, let alone their full-time colleagues? When a complex organization consistently pushes each individual worker to achieve for his or her own benefit while it simultaneously seeks status and minimizes the welfare of the collectivity, the very notion of the common good may melt into a puddle and evaporate.

Teaching suffers It is difficult to dedicate oneself to teaching students who do not want to take one's course and sometimes make it clear that they don't care a fig about it—though they do care about the grade. (Following the reasoning of the

accountability regime, students seem to feel that scoring well on tests is more important than learning.) It is especially difficult to give one's classes a high priority, when one's profession lauds scholarship, not teaching. At Wannabe University, the Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL), established in the 1990s, is supposed to address this problem by teaching teachers how to teach, but it cannot make them care. The head of one of the ITL's programs explained a problem he faces. Department heads order faculty who receive poor ratings on student evaluations to go to the institute. "They don't want to be here," he told me. He finds it difficult to help these "faculty-learners" who don't give a fig either. Some professors justify their distrust of the ITL by saying that it is more responsive to the central administration than to the instructors whom the institute supposedly serves.

However, one cannot simply blame colleges, universities, administrators, middle-managers, and professors for the decreased learning that Arum and Roksa document. When students study less; they learn less. I believe that their retreat from studying, especially studying alone, is a response to contemporary conditions, including the growing schism between the wealthy and everyone else that is associated with the current version of globalization, the mediatization of politics, religion, and daily life, and the commodification that has resulted as increased conformity masquerades as individualization.

Our students' comparatively poor study habits and their dedication to having fun are reminders that they have bought into contemporary norms about what they should be doing. Commodification has taught them to judge others by their possessions. The changing distribution of jobs—and the associated growing schism between the wealthy and the rest of us—has intensified the feeling that they must train to find a stable job. As Philip Kasinitz, Mary Waters, John Mollenkopf, and Jennifer Holdiiway document in *Inheriting the City: the Children of Immigrants Come of Age*, at CUNY many upwardly mobile second-generation Americans aim for a practical career. So do some Wan U students. Others have no idea why they are in college, except for their conviction that a college degree will somehow bring a good and (with luck) stable job. (Over the past four decades—from the New York City fiscal crisis to the Great Recession—, my classrooms have been peopled by a goodly percentage of students who raised their hands when I asked if they know people who were fired in the most recent recession.)

To be sure, these concerns are not new. Earlier generations of upwardly mobile undergraduates sought

training. In a bygone era wealthy students attended elite institutions without really knowing why they were there—except, of course, they felt sure that members of their social class were supposed to spend time in college. Many of the undergraduates of yesteryear also dedicated themselves to enjoying what they were certain were the best years of their life—, the time without responsibility. But contemporary social conditions, including the expansion of higher education, have exacerbated these themes.

Today's undergraduates are filled with contradictions. They want both social acceptance and private goods. They want to get through their coursework; they want jobs that pay well, but not the solitary learning necessary to stretch the mind. They want to have fun. They want to be recognized as individuals. They stand at the campus bus stops, cell phone glued to ear, stance announcing that they have a friend to talk with and so are not alone. Like the members of David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd*, they are most themselves when they are in a group.

The problem facing both educators and policy-makers is not simply what has happened to America's higher-education institutions. Rather, colleges and universities cannot be fixed without analyzing what has happened to our youngsters, too. We must reconsider the impact of contemporary neoliberalism and its accountability regime on both students and schools.

Further Reading

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