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Exploring Alternative Purposes for Higher Education*

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**(D)riven by Neoliberalism:
Exploring Alternative Purposes for Higher Education**

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The value of a degree. Social mobility. Job placement rates. Return on investment. These concepts permeate both the news media and academic discourse about higher education credentials. From provosts to presidents, students hear the message that getting a degree means getting a good job (Brown, 2015; Jaschik & Lederman, 2020; Obama, 2009). Higher education leaders view their provided credentials as commodities, acquired by monetary investment and converted into economic capital. Performance-based funding models similarly treat students as commodities, linking student performance on certain metrics to institutional income (Dougherty, Jones, Kahr, Pheatt, & Reddy, 2014). According to this logic, the benefit of higher education can only be understood inasmuch as it translates to economic or social gain, reproducing or altering class status (Morrison, 2017). In other words, higher education is only worthwhile if it generates revenue for students and schools. As a metanarrative, this notion of higher education as a means to individual gain is so entrenched in the discourse that it is almost impossible to think outside of it. How did we arrive at this notion and how can we think beyond it?

The current moment in which higher education institutions are shuttering and shifting due to the global COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to reflect on what higher education is doing in our society and who, as it is currently formulated, is benefiting. Online higher education, until recently the domain of broad-access, for-profit institutions or if anything a second tier of education within elite institutions, has abruptly become the new normal for all institutional types. The pandemic flattened the types of institutional instructional modalities to all-online, eliding a previously treasured distinction between mass and elite higher education. When the physical classroom and the physical campus—both hallmarks of elite higher education—are unavailable, how can elite and broad-access institutions define their purpose?

In this editorial, we think with theories of the university. The notion of theories, rather than theory, frames the ways that the university is multiple, and possible, even when it is (d)riven by capital. We begin with historical framings of the U.S. university, and then examine the shift from capitalist, legitimizing, militarizing institutions to the totalizing entity of today's neoliberal university. We then explore alternate readings and alternate possibilities, presented through scholarship and activism. We highlight examples of educational underpinnings that have ethical rather than economic ends (Booker & Vissoughi, 2020), that engage the transformational (the learning) rather than the credentialing (the schooling) aspects of education. As scholar and poet Fred Moten noted: "...the contradictions between the university as hedge fund, the university as real estate company, and the university as an intellectual institution, those contradictions are not sustainable" (Neal, 2018). Elite higher education's ties to accumulation, of labor, of land, and of capital are not entirely reliant on the physical occupation of space and the in-person construction/examination of knowledge, but the

¹ Both authors contributed equally to this work.

physically distanced present provides an opportunity to reflect on what higher education is doing in our society and what futures it could have.

Higher Education and Neoliberalism in the US

Current cultural norms say that college degrees are crucial for economic stability of the individual and the global economy (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013; Hout, 2012), a perspective that does not deviate far from the roots of higher education (Labaree, 2016). During the 19th century, the public university system was born as state governments began to see the benefit of building higher education campuses (Labaree, 2016). The benefits to the states included a more educated population—of White men—but also the accumulation (theft) of Indigenous land and resources (Boggs, Meyerhoff, Mitchell, & Schwartz-Weinstein, 2019). States accepted land and resources from the federal government, motivated by a desire to strengthen northern, “free” states, through First and Second Morrill Acts, which extracted resources from seized property to fund the development of a tiered system of higher education (Boggs et al., 2019; Lee & Ahtone, 2019).² These public institutions, along with the earlier elite private schools, however, were firmly rooted in capitalist growth and systemic self-interest, with the benefit of higher education accruing to the individual for their social or economic benefit (Labaree, 2016) and to the state, through its resource extraction (Boggs et al., 2019). Industrialization brought changes to the economy in specific ways for middle class families who no longer passed small businesses along to their descendants; higher education became a way for the children of these families to join an emergent professional class. Through the Second Morrill Act (1890), Black land-grant institutions were funded—at much lower rates than White universities—which focused on training teachers and agricultural workers (Boggs et al., 2019).

Our higher education system was built on an architecture of inequity (Labaree, 2016). American universities and colleges have always focused on providing a private benefit to the individual in the interest of the economy and the political position of the locality or nation, as well as the accumulation of capital, labor and land by the institution and state (Boggs et al., 2019). The influx of new matriculants and new government money into higher education brought on by both the G.I. Bill and Cold War concerns could be seen as a brief foray into conceptualizing higher education as a public good, but it was only a temporary blip in the longstanding United States philosophy of education as a private good (Olson, 1973; Labaree, 2016). The logics of educational provision remained rooted in capitalism. In fact, this “golden era” of state investment in education was motivated by the need for the absorption of a surplus of labor (i.e. soldiers returning from war) in order to prevent the collapse of the capitalist system (Boggs et al., 2019).

Though higher education initially only served the elite, even at scale and with open access, the higher education system continues to maintain inequity to the present day. The financial aid system illustrates the maintenance of inequity, with student debt loads and default rates falling most heavily on Black students and the shift from need-based to merit-based aid contributing to lower-income students’ accrual of student debt rather than receipt of grant aid (Olbrecht, Romano, & Teigen, 2016; Scott-Clayton, 2018a; 2018b). We also see this effective maintenance of privilege (Lucas, 2001) today in the pyramidal hierarchy of higher education access, with elite institutions perched atop the broad base of open-access offerings (Cottom, 2017). Students who attend for-profit institutions,

² While a full examination of the development of land grant institutions is outside the scope of this paper, the authors recommend this in-depth reporting on *land-grab universities*: <https://www.hcn.org/issues/52.4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities>

who are more likely to be students of color and lower-income students, are more likely to accrue debt and default on it (Scott-Clayton, 2018a; 2018b), meaning that the costs rather than any economic benefits of higher education maintain economic inequality.

Today, individuals cite economic concerns as the main reason for pursuing higher education. A recent Gallup poll found that 82% of college-degree holding adults said that they believed their degree was a beneficial financial investment (Haas, 2020). This drive towards a degree is commonly understood as a “natural” result of market forces in our capitalist society. Educational purpose over the last decades has been marketed as a means to create workers for jobs, obscuring the way that these workers provide exponential financial benefit to an elite group of (largely) White men in upper-class society (Labaree, 2016). It is possible that the growth in graduate program enrollment is a direct result of seeking more money through education credentials (e.g., Kot & Hendel, 2012).

Business leaders argue that there is a “skills gap” in the United States and new hires need training—accessed through higher education—to succeed in the workplace (Mattern, Burrus, Camera, O’Conner, Hansen, Gambrell, Casillas, & Bobek, 2014; Weathers, 2015). These leaders have called on the education system—all along the P-20 pipeline—to shape better-prepared workers for so-called twenty-first century jobs (Carnevale et al., 2013). Policymakers and legislators have responded to this call from the corporate sector and agreed that college and career readiness are a vital first step to provide individual students with a high quality of life as they transition into adulthood and the labor market (Loera, Nakamoto, Oh, & Rueda, 2013). Any rhetoric of education as a pursuit of critical thinking, community growth, interpersonal respect, and the common good has been subsumed to an economic purpose (Grant, 2012). Private and neoliberal approaches to education are the dominant orientation toward higher education, orientations that start in the K-12 system.

Neoliberalism and K-12 Education

Neoliberalism and the neoliberal university are phrases often tossed around in academia, though consensus about what they mean is absent (Brown, 2015). In traditional economic (not neo-) liberalism, the state should not interfere in any way with its citizens’ lives—they possess freedom and the state should in no way curtail their autonomy. The early twentieth-century economist Friedrich Hayek, the philosophical godfather of neoliberalism, proposed that the market and the market alone, not any external agency like the government, should regulate how private businesses conducted their business dealings (Olssen & Peters, 2005). James Buchanan, writing after Hayek, modified Hayek’s principles for private actors and applied them to the public sector (Olssen & Peters, 2005). In this editorial, we define neoliberalism as the dominant philosophical orientation that deploys the logic of the free market and requires individuals and other entities to be maximally productive and self-sufficient in order to justify their existence in an economic system built upon precarity (Biehl & Locke, 2017; Johnson, 2018; Olssen & Peters, 2005). We follow Wilson and Chivers Yochim (2017) in their framing of precarity as living under a governmental structure in which the only constant is economic uncertainty and the constant threat of economic collapse. As Brown (2015) wrote, neoliberalism is “the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity” (p. 44). This process has been in full swing in America for the past 40 years.

In the United States, neoliberal policies can be traced back to the tax revolt era of and immediately before the Reagan presidency (Ambrosino, 2013), during which decreased support for paying taxes meant that governmental services depended on an ever-shrinking pool of funding. The logic of the market grew in scope to encompass provisions of services previously thought to be the purview of the government, including utilities and roads, for instance (Brown, 2015). Purported to be an

opportunity for individual agency and self-sufficiency without the suffocating oversight of the government, neoliberal philosophies required any entity receiving government funding to justify its existence in economic terms. Those that could not, such as non-profit organizations, were deemed undeserving of governmental subsidies and thus subject to privatization. Market forces dictate all institutional behavior and force all individual choices to be made in thrall to market; a point we elaborate on below.

Accountability. In neoliberal contexts, the only things worth measuring in the educational sector are those that are counted and countable, a perspective magnified in the current context. Educational outcomes must be quantified in terms of test scores and value-added education, paired with decreased state regulation and support to justify their receipt of funding (Gildersleeve, Kuntz, Pasque, & Carducci, 2010; Hursh, 2007). Biesta (2016) noted that standardized testing has shifted the public rhetoric—if not public opinion—about educational purpose, meaning that we have come to value what we measure, rather than measuring what we value. To pursue the elusive goal of financial and productive efficiency in public schools, educational leaders used management techniques taken from for-profit businesses. In an environment of constant austerity, state educational expenditures can be continuously decreased in the name of efficiency and accountability, requiring that schools do more with less (Ambrosino, 2013). The government then blames schools for their inability to meet these seemingly-objective metrics of standardized achievement based solely on schools' use of scarce resources.

Neoliberalism and higher education. Higher education, like the K-12 system, is far from immune to neoliberal policies (Brown, 2015). Within this policy context, students are consumers who make a conscious, rational, and informed decision to participate in higher education and who alone reap the benefits of an education credential (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004a). Higher education is a good that student-consumers buy and institutions sell, comparable to a car or a computer (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004b). Neoliberal policies employ market logic to encourage an environment of minimal governmental regulation and financial support for higher education (Ayers, 2005). Rather than the government providing and policing public goods, the market itself oversees the goods (Olssen & Peters, 2005). In this context, the government owes its citizens nothing but optimal free market conditions. Governmental responsibility ceases once it has fostered a free-market environment for its consumer-citizens.

As a result of this governmental posture, funding for higher education has to be scrutinized to ensure its maximally efficient and purposeful use. Two consequences of neoliberalism are the systematic defunding of higher education because of its inability to demonstrate its added value and increasing skepticism that higher education is a public good (Labaree, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004a). As Ayers (2005) argues, in a neoliberal system “the discourse of education for participation and leadership in democratic society is overtaken by the economic discourse of production and consumerism” (p. 531). If students are consumers, higher education institutions enter into a business relationship with them and must hold up their end of the contractual bargain by giving students a proper return on their investment through an appropriately valuable product. College ranking systems act as shorthand signifiers for the quality of the product (Brown, 2015; Ordorika & Lloyd, 2015). In neoliberal contexts, higher education only holds value as a product benefitting the individual.

Neoliberal philosophies seep into other areas of life beyond policies and governmental structures (Wilson & Chivers Yochim, 2017). Under neoliberalism, individuals are as unfettered as a

government-made free market can allow to pursue their economic goals. This supposed freedom comes with a tradeoff: individuals are solely responsible for their economic decisions. Life, then, becomes purely economic. All pursuits, whether aesthetic, educational, or familial should be weighed for their economic utility. Through neoliberalism, we are habituated to a set of practices that become compulsions. Neoliberalism extracts who we are alongside our labor. Neoliberal economic systems encourage people to operate in ways that maximize their efficiency and therefore their ability to profit. Without the benefit of any sort of safety net, governmental or otherwise, though, individuals are solely responsible for their economic decisions. Neoliberalism, in the current moment, “increasingly institutes itself as coequal with reality itself, so that as to imagine alternatives is seemingly to lapse into delusion” (De Lissovoy, 2015, p. 31). The COVID-19 crisis illustrates the consequences of framing all actions in purely monetary terms, disguising societal forces like structural racism and the hollowing out of unemployment benefits into one of individual responsibility. Though beyond the scope of this piece, we find it deeply disturbing that workers in sectors such as medicine, public transit, grocery stores, meatpacking plants, and warehouse workers are both deemed to be essential and therefore at a high risk of exposure to the virus; we are not surprised that people of color are disproportionately affected by the crisis (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). The essential workers’ bodies are sacrificed on the altars of capitalism. Under neoliberal logics, those who are suffering the most during the pandemic should have been better economic actors and are to blame for their own pain.

These neoliberal logics extend into higher education and conversations about higher education financing and funding. Economic metaphors abound. Discussions of higher education funding that link the value of higher education—an economic framing—solely with student workforce outcomes reduce the point of a degree to how it can translate into success in the job market—another economic framing. In neoliberal framings, so commonplace as to become unremarkable, the student consumer makes choices in college about what might bring them the most profit, ensuring either economic stability or mobility. Students who choose a degree that might not directly translate to a clear job, like a philosophy major, receive scorn not meted out to the engineer, accountant, or computer science student. The common question, “what are you going to do with that,” positions the worth of college education solely on the ability of the credential to grant entry into a labor market characterized by constant precarity. Financial aid for school, then, is similarly considered to be a bet on one’s own employability; student debt ought not to be forgiven because the student, as a good, rational, consumer, should have known what they were getting into. Insurmountable debt symbolizes the inability of the indebted to be a savvy consumer. In all of this, higher education is considered to be useful for purely economic ends. We ask, what if the focus of higher education was not on schooling—getting certain grades and therefore a credential—but rather on learning?

With this background in mind, we as scholars, policymakers, and members of the global public should recognize the neoliberal logics underpinning the movements we make towards equity and efficiency in higher education. Policymakers and higher education planners aim for numerical metrics of degree attainment—such as 60% of Texas residents—because they contend that when that is achieved the state’s economy will benefit—somehow. Left on the table are questions about what happens for the other 40% of people and whether the hopefully-credentialed 60% are surviving, let alone flourishing, a concept we discuss below (Rose, 2010). We must recognize the way that our narrowed frame of university as job-training remains true to the long-held belief that higher education is a private good, which in turn reproduces inequities beyond the university or college. The tendrils of inequality can be found in the housing market, healthcare access, and the environment.

Thinking in New Ways

Despite the infiltration of neoliberal ideas into education, the current policy context is not immutable. Instead of relying on economic metaphors to theorize the purpose of education, we suggest examining education using different lenses and new imaginings. First, we draw from theories of educational flourishing (Allen, 2016; Grant, 2012; Rose, 2010), which honor educational purpose outside the confines of economic returns. Rose (2010) contended that educational flourishing takes place in a context where instrumental or rational understandings of education are valued alongside humane considerations of learning. Grant (2012), drawing on Aristotelian notions of “living well,” also employs the language of flourishing, explaining that it “involves people making meaning and sense of important aspects of their life” (p. 914). In her work of educational and political philosophy, Allen (2016) contended that a joint refiguring around the purpose of education must proceed any conversation about education and equality. Relying on the work of John Rawls and Hannah Arendt, she developed a humanistic baseline of educational potential which could develop and support human flourishing.

Allen (2016) divides the goals of education—or the ways of achieving human flourishing—into four potentialities that must be nurtured through education: breadwinning; preparation for civic or political engagement; creative expression; and preparation for rewarding relationships in intimacy and leisure. Importantly, Allen observed that pitting the public good view of education against the private view is not instructional, when one is better served by looking at the two as compatible. She argued: “Each person’s individual need to prepare for breadwinning work and for civic and political engagement is simply the other side of the coin of the social need for broad economic competitiveness and an engaged citizenry” (p. 17). These goals frame education as an individual and a communitarian product. While the framework of educational flourishing falls short of revolution, we appreciate the way that it rattles the cage of neoliberal higher education and shakes loose some of the potential in imagining beyond this narrow frame.

Our second lens pushes beyond the binaries of public and private purposes of education, situating educational value in communities, self-determination, and dignity. Tuck (2009) advanced an epistemological shift with the introduction of desire-based research which recognizes that social science pits reproduction against resistance, a fruitless binary that strips individual agency. Within this framework are two concepts we argue can lead to a more fruitful framing of the purpose of higher education as a right rather than a privilege (Harvey, 2008), as holding potential for stewardship rather than accumulation. Educational sovereignty (Tuck, 2011) speaks to the process of individuals and communities exercising self-determination through education. It honors intergenerational relationships and rescinds the authority of the state to confer respect and dignity. Additionally, we can seek out moments of insynchronicity (Tuck, 2010), “the gaps between what institutions, governments, and people say they do and what they actually do—as revealing units of analysis” (p. 644). By using these concepts within a desire-based framework we can engage in work that extends what current research can explain (Tuck & Yang, 2012) and recognize values that individuals place on education outside of individual returns. Through this desire-based lens, we can see the way that in higher education, credentials from accredited institutions hold the power to confer dignity and respect, but the journey to graduation is mired in exploitation and disrespect—for the undergraduates with loans, the graduate research assistants whose labor feeds the machine, and the almost always non-

unionized workers who feed, clothe, and house the students (Magolda, 2016). Whether through demands for unionization, divestment of endowment funds from extractive industries, or the building of new institutions of learning that operate outside of the current system, we see the potential for both insurgent institutional reform and grassroots rebirth.

Indigenous ways of knowing and being that originated in the land known as South America could be helpful in thinking about a more relational, democratic version of higher education. BuenVivir is an indigenous paradigm that sees human and nature as a collectivity and pushes back on linear understandings of progress. It contains “an understanding of human well-being that goes far beyond its material aspect ...including collectivity and solidarity as a basis of well-being...” and it “understands nature as the starting and ending point of life itself and understands that humanity has to live in interconnected harmony with this source of life in the achievement of well-being” (Cerdán, 2013, p. 21). Importantly, BuenVivir takes a localized approach to building relationality and collectivity, but does not exclude network building with a broader community. In thinking about how the university can be more relational with less contact, we are excited by examples like the Speculative Education Colloquium, a subversion of university resources towards decolonial and ethnical learning. Powered by Stanford’s Zoom and powerful “collective dreaming” (Garcia, 2020), this assemblage generated beautiful ideas about how to value education differently, and itself was a practice, an enactment, of doing that valuing (Booker & Vissoughi, 2020; Yang, 2020).

There are recent movements, both intellectual and activist, which call out these insynchronicities and call for educational sovereignty. In his text, *A Third University is Possible*, la paperson (2017) advocated for the need to move “beyond the colonial” to the decolonial, which, “requires countering what power seems to be up to” (la paperson, 2017, p. xv). Theories of black fugitivity and the undercommons (Harney & Moten, 2013) reveal the possibility of collective action that forms from the refusal to accept the choices offered by the neoliberal university. Echoing this, students in the Netherlands started their own university, the University of Colour, because their experiences wrestling with the absence of authentic democracy within the University of Amsterdam raised doubts about the ability of a colonial institution to actually decolonize (Awethu!, Blak, van der Scheer, van Meyeren, Martis, & Nam Chi, 2018) and instead re-thought educational practice by creating de-centered, collectivist, unstructured topics of study without grades or teachers, united around learning.

In writing about the death of liberal arts in the university, Stover (2017) concluded that “The humanities and the university do need defenders, and the arts have had advocates as long as they have existed. The way to defend the arts is to practice them” (para. 41). We argue that the best way to make the university different, is to practice difference and remake the university. Harvey (2008), writing more broadly about the modern city, contended that the right to remake is a collective rather than a human right, though we believe his argument applies to the university as well:

The right to the [university] is, therefore, far more than a right of individual access to the resources that the [university] embodies: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart’s desire. It is, moreover, a collective rather than an individual right since changing the [university] inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power. (p. 272)

In recent weeks, universities around the country shuttered their campuses because of the threat of a global pandemic. Universities scrambled to shift instruction online, to duplicate digitally their onsite

offerings. Business as usual, but is it? These changes certainly impact students in inequitable ways. We suggest using this time to rethink what higher education can do and who else it can work for.

Conclusion

Neoliberal policies have overtaken higher education, going hand in hand with privatized notions of education as a private good endemic to the system (Labaree, 2016). Though it was a slow process, neoliberalism seems to be firmly embedded in federal and state higher education policies. In neoliberal contexts, the purpose and function of higher education is to create good consumers and workers, with minimal government intervention along the way. The accountability movement in both K-12 and in higher education indicates that education only has value if its worth can be measured in quantifiable outcomes. It is the individual's responsibility to make a rational and informed decision about investing in higher education; the individual alone bears the burden for funding and persisting in order to attain a credential. Neoliberal educational policies do not promote equity and access in higher education because those goals are not concerns of the free market. For example, in neoliberal logic, parents unhappy with the quality of schools in their district could simply exercise their buying power to move away or refuse to participate in a tax system. The free market is supposed to regulate and solve any problems through the logic of competition. Though difficult to achieve, a possible solution can come from using new philosophies of higher education, those that do not depend on instrumental concepts and instead encourage educational sovereignty and insynchronicity, leaving room for alternate understandings of what education can do and means. We are living in a time when neoliberalism—built on the economic and seeping into the fabric of who we are—is consuming itself—consuming us. The current crisis could be a trial run for imagining what higher education can look like in a new moment.

Around the globe, people are asking questions about what we can learn from the pandemic and observing what the pandemic is doing to our world. The air is clearer and pollution has dropped because humans have stopped moving around as much (de Sousa Santos, 2020). With conflicting messages about social distancing from federal, state, and local governments, citizens who (can and do) choose to stay home are exercising a biopolitics from below (Sotiris, 2020), governing themselves in communitarian interests. We ask, what can the pandemic teach us about possible rethinkings of the university. Just over a decade ago, the financial crisis—again, framed economically but with devastating impacts on human lives and the environment—slashed funding for higher education. Public universities have not yet reached levels of pre-2008 funding today (Mitchell, Palacios, & Leachman, 2015). In this pandemic, however, schooling is impacted in a specific way that it was not in 2008. Education did not change in its most basic forms in 2008. And education may not change fundamentally now, but we are in an ideal moment to look under the hood, to question what is really happening—or could be happening—in education.

If neoliberal logics are taken to their extreme and higher education is a purely economic exchange, are institutions engaging in competitive pricing to offer the best credential for the lowest price and minimal effort for the consumer? If education is more than that, what exactly are institutions offering? If institutional leadership finds those questions inopportune, perhaps they should think deeply about purposes outside of neoliberal constructions. Perhaps the shifts in the modality of higher education could lead to further thought about what education looks like, quite literally, beyond the classroom and the credentialing accoutrement of the neoliberal moment. What if the purpose of education is learning?

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