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Review of Jennifer Washburn's *University, Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of American Higher Education*. New York: Basic Books, 2005
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Washburn's welcome volume tells us many things we may already know, but it does so with a level of detail we probably don't possess, and in terms that may extend the process of educating the *public*—not just fellow academics—about threats to public education. In nine chapters and an introduction she covers a range of ways higher ed has come to compromise itself—from licensing boondoggles, to corporate meddling in academic publishing, to private poaching of public research, to the erosion of competitive peer review in federal funding, to, as one title has it, “The Commercial Squeeze on Teaching & the Humanities.” We even get some higher ed history, plus a much-needed account of the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980, a surprisingly underdebated piece of legislation which, born from a fear of diminishing American competitiveness, has enabled a transformative level of private profit from and control of publicly-generated research.

In her introduction, Washburn addresses the basic concerns many of us have been articulating for more than a decade. Whereas average Americans may be most alarmed by the competition to get into the right school—and the rising cost of paying should you gain admission—she hopes to educate them about “the growing role that market forces and commercial values have assumed in academic life” and the pervasiveness of “a new proprietary culture more akin to the business world” (ix, xii). As a result of such trends, “the job of undergraduate education often seems like a subsidiary activity at many universities today” (xiv). Indeed. Perhaps because she is something of an outsider, Washburn seems to feel no compunction about defending disinterested inquiry from the corporate sponsorship of research—a stance many of us on the inside may have cynically abandoned years ago.

Washburn's subsequent account of the partnership between Berkeley and pharmaceutical firm Novartis is illuminating. It is also inspiring to learn that the arrangement inspired some concerned Golden Bears to form Students for Responsible Research—but distressing to discover that another critic of the deal, biology professor Ignacio Chapela, may have been denied tenure as a result of his resistance. That such controversies date back to the early 1900s in no way diminishes the magnitude of the current crisis, and to her credit, Washburn apportions part of the blame to academics themselves, who, as a trend toward decentralization at many research universities crested,

“pursued their own personal agendas, with little regard for the university as a whole” (47). We don’t hear that rebuke enough.

We also need more reminders about Jonas Salk’s famous reply to Edward R. Murrow, when Murrow asked Salk “who owned the patent to his polio vaccine.” Salk responded, “Well, the people, I would say. There is no patent. Could you patent the sun?” (52). Nevertheless, Washburn’s account of the Bayh-Dole Act—otherwise known as the University-Small Business Patent Procedures Act—demonstrates how much sun-patenting we’ve engaged in these last three decades. “Whereas in the past,” she writes, universities had transferred knowledge to industry through open channels—the education and training of students, faculty consulting for companies, sabbaticals, publications, and conferences—from here on in the emphasis would be on staking proprietary claims to research, and then licensing it to industry. (70)

Benjamin Franklin famously declined to patent the stove he designed, invoking a reasoning I’m sure Salk would appreciate. “[A]s we enjoy great Advantages from the Inventions of others,” Franklin writes in his *Autobiography*, “we should be glad of an Opportunity to serve others by any Invention of ours, and this we should do freely and generously.” I myself remain glad to share the version of Franklin I teach to my students, and trust that whatever value accrues to that teaching should remain those students’—not something I might tax or tithe anytime some insight from my survey class proves valuable in their lives. (If I’m not mistaken, I think that’s one of the reasons I became a teacher in the first place.)

Elsewhere, in chapters such as “The Republic of Science in Turmoil,” “Are Conflicts of Interest Hazardous to Our Health?,” “The University as Business,” and “Dreaming of Silicon Valley,” Washburn further chronicles how our privatizing of the knowledge commons warps everything about the academic life: the trust required to produce research, the dissemination of that work, the expeditious training of new professionals, the honesty required in academic consulting, and—most pointedly for me right now, as my employer chases federal funding for our own silicon dreams—the responsibility to our various publics, which responsibility may be irredeemably compromised when our research corridor proves as illusory as so many before it. When federal earmarks fail to produce the industrial genius and wealth their sponsors were promised, then good luck getting more money for actual necessities like—oh, I don’t know—infrastructure, maintenance, cost-of-living adjustments, etc. Market ideology may be the only construct affecting university life that is even more pernicious and addictive than academics’ own delusion that we’re not—most of us, anyway—workers.

Lest we become too depressed, Washburn concludes with “The Path Forward: Preserving the Public Domain.” She proposes the following:

- 1) the creation of independent third-party licensing bodies . . . that would assume control over university tech-transfer and commercialization activities nationwide;
- 2) an amendment to the Bayh-Dole Act clarifying that the true intent of the legislation is to promote widespread use of taxpayer-financed research, not to maximize short-term profits;
- 3) new requirements that all federally funded university scholars comply with strict conflict-of-interest laws; and
- 4) the creation of a new federal agency to administer and monitor industry-sponsored clinical drug trials submitted to the Food and Drug Administration. (228)

Admirable all. You might say we need to put the “public” back into “public education.” We also, of course, need to keep educating those publics. (Remember, that was the reason Franklin founded our first public library—because he knew not everyone was going to possess the wherewithal he did to educate her- or himself.) And also, of course, we need to organize—and by we I mean *you*—all of you who know even better than Jennifer Washburn or—and I use this word perhaps only to gag—the *stakeholders* on behalf of whom she writes just what is wrong with higher education today.

The book’s flaws are minor. Like many people writing about higher education—even those from within its world—Washburn tends to focus on relatively elite institutions and has little to say about schools like my own: erstwhile teachers’ colleges that have grown up to become, among other things, regional comprehensive universities. One could—and one of us *should*—write an equivalent exposé just about schools at that level. My other complaint is that Washburn relies overmuch on a journalistic tendency to visually and biographically characterize everyone who appears in her account. A sampling: “A burly former high-school football player who preferred blue jeans to tweed jackets and regularly took part in demonstrations against the Vietnam War, Boyer” (54); “An insurance specialist with black-and-silver-streaked hair, Milstein” (130); “A stocky man with a broad, ruddy face and straight brown hair carefully parted on the side, Crow” (185). Such tics can prove distracting. Nevertheless, we need more books like this. Buy several copies, tab the highlights, and mail *University, Inc.* to your legislators, education-beat reporters, school administrators, etc. We can’t tell these stories often enough, and we need more allies as we act in response to them.