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Academic Capitalism In A Public Ivy

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A repeat ivy league offender, I naively hoped that my first teaching job would catapult me outside of the corporatist educational model that had dominated my experience as both an undergraduate and a graduate student, first at Columbia University and then at Yale. A product of public school education for the first 17 years of my life, I longed for greener academic pastures, far away from the elite pretension and palpable hostility so characteristic of that old (white) boy's network euphemistically known as the ivy league. As I made the decision to decline a job at a small, private college close to my partner in favor of the distant SUNY Binghamton, I told myself that a university with a fifty-year commitment to public education and a faculty and grad student union was more than worth the long commute. Though I would no doubt frequently disagree with administrative policy, at least it was the product of an imperfect democratic process in which state legislators, administrators, UUP members, grad students, undergraduates, faculty senators and a board of trustees had a voice, if not equal decision-making power. Gone were the omnipotent corporate attorneys and financial mavens who refused to recognize GESO, the graduate employees union at Yale, or deal in good faith with Locals 34 and 35, the service and maintenance unions. Gone were the backdoor deals with Barnes & Noble, Au Bon Pain and other corporations who provided subcontracted (even homeless) labor in exchange for lucrative contracts.

Okay, I knew SUNY B would not be UTOPIA. I'd spent several years in the mossy tower, but I had not lost my mind completely. I knew the pressures would be significant in the public university sector. Life in the academic trenches had made me a critic of private universities and the disturbing trend towards privatization in higher education generally. In the public sector, though, I thought the enemies would be clearer, the battles waged on visible, public terrain. Besides, I would have stronger, better equipped support troops (see the above list of educational players). In short, I expected SUNY Binghamton to be far removed from the ivy gang of six. Imagine my chagrin, then, when barely on campus a month, I unsuspectingly clicked onto the university website only to find the words, "SUNY Binghamton: A Public Ivy" glaring back at me.

I suppose I should not have been surprised. After all, I'd just attended a two-week faculty orientation in which administrators emphasized the faculty's role as university rainmakers. Research dollars, they advised, would make SUNY Binghamton a competitor on the global educational stage, attracting better faculty and smarter students, while forging ties to industry and government. These university boosters countered the Notorious B.I.G. mantra "more money, more problems" with visions of corporate sponsorship dancing in their heads. "We want," more than one administrator drummed into our newly anointed faculty heads, "to achieve Research II status." We were assured, however, that a greater research focus need have no deleterious effects on our teaching. In fact, administrators proudly noted the fact that SUNY Binghamton had been quite successful in the most recent college rankings. *U.S. News and World Report* ranked the school #3 in "operating efficiently" based on its ability to "rate relatively high in educational quality but spend relatively less money to achieve quality." *Money's 1998 College Guide* rated SUNY Binghamton fourth in the category of "Best College Values," while *The Princeton Review* raved, "Binghamton University often known as the 'ivy of the SUNYs,' offers a top-notch education at a state-

school price."¹ SUNY Binghamton's "efficiency" and ability to offer education on the cheap had catapulted it (albeit symbolically) into the dubious ranks of the ivy league.

This faculty orientation provoked more questions than it resolved. What, I wondered, was the relationship between SUNY Binghamton's newly won status as an efficiency expert and its current drive to court and win federal and private research dollars? One answer, I soon found out, lies in the current restructuring of the funding and allocation of resources within New York's state university system. The much reviled RAM (Resource Allocation Methodology), under the new moniker BAP (Budget Allocation Process) has been implemented. Establishing enrollment quotas and emphasizing "research, public service" and "performance," BAP represents one critical stage in the further privatization of SUNY.² In this schema, tuition dollars remain on each campus and are redistributed to schools and departments at the discretion of each university's administrators. For Binghamton, this has meant a 3% increase in operating funds this year, but other SUNY branches such as Oswego, Buffalo, and HSC Brooklyn have taken a significant financial hit.³ As this funding schema takes hold, Binghamton will begin to attract disgruntled students adversely affected by other SUNY campus' losses in classes, programs, and staff. Not only are SUNY campuses pitted against one another, but students are reduced to variables in a financial equation, nothing more and nothing less.

The process by which campus administrators will actually redistribute these localized funds has been a matter of no little debate, but as of yet, no actual procedure has been articulated. When pressed by faculty at a recent meeting, the Provost merely replied that "there [would] be some relation between generating resources and allocation."⁴ One might assume that investments (read departments or entire schools) deemed to obtain the best return will receive disproportionate funding since BAP works by a logic of rationalization and "total quality management" long ago introduced into the corporate workplace. The system classifies students into 12 revenue categories; on one end are undergraduates taking introductory courses worth \$1,004 and on the other end are advanced graduate students worth \$15,435.⁵ Departments are then pressured to invest in courses and faculty who will attract the largest enrollments. For those of us who do interdisciplinary work and have joint appointments (admittedly, a small number) BAP has even more insidious consequences since it encourages departments to vie with one another for scarce enrollment slots. Departments have little incentive to cross-list courses or sanction inter-department teaching since from a cost benefits analysis standpoint it makes no cents. Already, there is significant pressure to quantify and increase the ways in which faculty labor generates departmental revenue.

Another significant part of the BAP plan encourages faculty to seek outside grants by introducing a formula whereby individual campuses will receive a 20% match for total direct and indirect costs averaged over three years for research activity.⁶ This juicy carrot is combined with a blunt stick. In an as yet unarticulated new set of "performance indicators," faculty will be judged by their scholarly productivity, measured in part, no doubt, by the number and size of fellowships and grants they obtain. Those of us doing politically unpopular or academically unfashionable projects in the Humanities and Social Sciences may find ourselves in an increasingly vulnerable position as research dollars become the new criteria for advancement or even employment. The shift to BAP is only one instance of the numerous ways in which SUNY Binghamton is adjusting to the leaner and meaner realities of 21st century global capitalism.

The point of these musings is not to suggest that the SUNY system is undergoing a particularly unique transformation. Indeed, SUNY is merely jumping on a train that's long since left the station. As J. Hillis Miller noted in a 1996 issue of *Profession*, "[U]niversities are more and more coming to be governed by corporations...[and seen as a] site...for the production of globally exchanged information."⁷ Though compellingly alarmist, Hillis Miller's statement misses the point. The problem is not simply that universities are being governed by corporations. They are increasingly transmuting themselves into mini corporations governed by the cost efficiency logic that makes them compelling business partners.⁸

The outlines of this drastic transformation are outlined in a recent book entitled *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies and the Entrepreneurial University*, in which sociologists Sheila Slaughter and Larry Leslie analyze what they term the "global knowledge economy." ⁹ This economy is structured by rapidly proliferating partnerships between public universities and the corporate sector. In case studies of universities in Australia, Canada, the U.K. and the U.S., Slaughter and Leslie demonstrate that public universities increasingly court corporate money to offset the loss of government block grants. This has occasioned a cataclysmic change in the way public universities operate. Faculty, in Slaughter and Leslie's view, are no longer able to occupy the tenuous space between capital and labor they have held since the Industrial Revolution. Instead they are increasingly becoming direct participants in the market in order to fund their research. As a result, a new breed of academic player has been bred, "academic capitalists" or "state-subsidized entrepreneurs" who "act as capitalists from within the public sector" (*AC*, 9). They must compete in the public sector in order to make their areas of research or individual departments viable financial entities. This has had numerous ripple effects. Many corporations have closed their research and development departments, using public universities as their state-subsidized laboratories. This technology transfer, in turn, fuels national economic growth.

The departments most closely linked to industry through intellectual property law and technology transfers are the biotechnical sciences, engineering, law, and business schools. Since the 1970s, money has flooded these departments while money to the humanities and social sciences has slowed to a trickle. Currently, the technoscientists who produce the digital televisions, new microcomputer processors and telecommunications networks are shifting the terms of global, public debate in critical ways. Aware of the growing income gap, humanities and social science departments are increasingly subject to the logic of the market, seeking to strike their own Faustian bargains with capital. Academics vie for prestigious publishers for their books, hoping that will increase the likelihood of attaining tenure (or even a tenure-track job.) Celebrity academics attract donors whose patronage increases the prestige of individual faculty and their departments. Intellectual merit is increasingly determined by one's relation to capital, as much as the worth of one's research or publications. Is it any wonder that presidents at many leading universities sit on the boards of major corporations? As Slaughter and Leslie underscore, "This change in financial structure and relation to industry is radically altering the nature of academic labor: changes in what academics do, how they allocate their time" (*AC*, 60). The increasing use of adjunct and graduate student labor is a crucial ripple effect of the growth of academic capitalism since it saves down-sizing universities millions and allows tenured and tenure-track faculty more time to pursue their research. Spiraling class sizes are yet another way to cut costs and elevate the needs of university administrators and industry--more research hours or networking time for faculty--over those of students.

As the new BAP structure demonstrates, this process has already reached an advanced stage within the SUNY system. Administrators at Binghamton and other SUNY campuses are refashioning their campuses into corporations and their faculty into "academic capitalists" with a little help from SUNY central and Governor Pataki. Lest we think of Pataki as a kinder, gentler Republican, since he took office the largest increase in tuition has been accompanied by a \$294 million reduction in financial aid. ¹⁰ Examples of the corporatizing of SUNY abound on Binghamton's campus. Since 1992, administrators have undertaken a campaign to spruce up SUNY Binghamton's identity by referring to it as Binghamton University, the only name emblazoned on paraphernalia in the campus bookstore. The Marriott Corporation and Barnes & Noble enjoy exclusive and highly lucrative contracts with the university, and over 100 undergraduates at SUNY Binghamton now serve as unpaid teaching assistants, a measure patently designed to save faculty time and university money.

In perhaps the most appalling recent revelation, Binghamton administrators sought advice on managing their rapidly privatizing university from who else but the Disney Institute. *The Village Voice* reported that in 1997 several Binghamton administrators attended three days worth of seminars hosted by those purveyors of Mickey. For a fee of \$18,000, the Disney Institute presented inspiring workshops such as the "Magic of Service" which later translated into a Binghamton program called "The Quality Service Project"

(VV).

It is in this context that one must understand the new campaign to restructure SUNY Binghamton as a public ivy. Expanding pacts between public universities and private capital are not the way of the future. They are the present. For many of us, these recent developments are disturbing, to say the least. Unlike V.I. Lenin, I do not purport to know "what is to be done." I do know, however, that the longer faculty and administrators acquiesce to SUNY's privatization agenda by structuring departments and courses to meet new BAP-tized criteria, then the sooner all of us may be standing on street corners holding signs that read, "Will teach for food."

Notes

1. SUNY Binghamton, "What They're Saying about Binghamton University," pamphlet, n.d., n.p.
2. Anne McCarthy, "Harpur College of Arts and Sciences Chairs and Program Directors Meeting," minutes distributed via email, 29 January 1999, n.p.
3. For more information on these differential revenue scales, contact the Student Association of the State University of New York which has compiled detailed figures on budgetary implications of RAM.
4. Harper College minutes, n.p.
5. "SUNY: Campus Funding, Resource Allocation Methodology," power point presentation delivered and distributed at a Fall 1998 meeting, n.d., 3.
6. Harper College minutes, n.p.
7. J. Hillis Miller, "Literary Study in the Transnational University," *Profession* 1996 6-14. Quoted in Robert Marzec, "The University Archive and the Catachrestic Checkerboard: Beloved Among the Microprocessors," *Crossings: A Counter-Disciplinary Journal of Philosophy, Cultural and Literary Studies* v1, n1, Spring 1997, 5.
8. For more on this "cost efficiency" ideology see "Rethinking *Rethinking SUNY*: The Costly Ideology Informing 'Cost Efficiency,'" *Crossings: A Counter-Disciplinary Journal of Philosophy, Cultural and Literary Studies* v1, n1, Spring 1997, 164-177.
9. Sheila Slaughter and Larry Leslie, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies and the Entrepreneurial University* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Hereafter referred to as *AC* in the body of the text.
10. Deirdre Hussey and Carla Spartos, "Eminent Domain: Scavenging for Funds in the Age of For-Profit Education," *The Village Voice*, 13-19 January 1999, online version. Hereafter cited in the body of the text as *VV*.

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