

## **WHOSE MODEL STUDENT? LEARNER-CENTERED DISCOURSE AND THE POST-SECONDARY PRIVATIZATION AGENDA**

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Using discourse analysis, the author identifies contradictions in privatization discourse in order to highlight how state-based educational reform has used a normative language of student interests to fundamentally redefine the nature of the university's mission and its faculty based governance structures. The author proposes a counter-discourse that creates broader discursive forums for those who view the university as a public and democratic intellectual space. A primary aim is to create affinity identities in which the social and moral agency of faculty and students is recognized and used to challenge the ongoing disruptive corporatization agenda in higher education.

### **Introduction**

According to Janice Gross Stein (2002) the modern era in which we now live is dominated by a “cult of efficiency” that has turned economic productivity into an end unto itself, and quite often a moral goal or virtue in its own right. In her words, “elevating efficiency, turning it into an end, misuses language, and this has profound consequences for the way we as citizens conceive of public life” (p. 3). One of the key ironies of this displaced focus is that its cost may come in the form of a loss of any collective understanding of the place of the university as a social *institution* in a meaningful democratic public sphere (Stein, 2002). It does this not only by undercutting any broader discussion about educational aims but also by filtering out outcomes that are complex, contestable, and not readily reducible to economic quantification—concepts like citizenship, social justice, and the public good.

Consequently, building on the work of Kirby (2007, 2011) and others (Brownlee, 2015; Smith, 2014, 2015; Shanahan & Jones, 2007; Lynch, 2006; Polster & Newson, 2015), the present paper will examine structural reforms and their relationship to influential governmental policy papers from Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta, as the author argues that the discourse of “student-centered learning” and the call to transform universities into needs-driven “learning organizations” is an important neoliberal discursive strategy that replaces the traditional faculty governance model with a carefully managed community of educational consumers (Ministry of Advanced Education, 2005; Rae, 2005; Plant, 2007; Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2015). Indeed, it is impossible to properly assess the strategic role of calls for more learner-centered institutions without examining the broader context provided by the growing prominence of applied research and the radical restructuring of post-secondary funding (Hogan & Trotter, 2013). Despite its surface appeal, a rhetoric of student care forecloses the possibility of a deeper analysis of the privatization agenda’s many harmful effects, including unprecedented tuition fee increases, the outsourcing of university teaching, performance-based funding, and corporatized governance structures (Hemsley-Brown, 2011).

Accordingly, it has become increasingly vital for both faculty and students to resist neoliberal reforms by utilizing the critical intellectual functions of the university and the institutional protections associated with it—namely, tenure, academic freedom, and intellectual dissent (Kezar, Chambers, & Burkhardt, 2005). To reaffirm higher education’s public mission critical educators must highlight the relationship between consumerism and student-learning movements and create more critical, tangible forms of empowerment that acknowledge the crippling burdens neoliberal structural reforms have foisted onto students (Pawlick, 2012; Shaker, Macdonald, & Wodrich, 2013). From this solidarity-based perspective, the question is

not simply who owns a right like academic freedom but how those rights, or, more importantly, their absence, might reshape the institutional space in which participants interact. In short, within the high-stakes discursive game of post-secondary privatization, faculty must use their institutional rights to create affinity spaces that promote public activism and social critique within deliberative communities open to all those who choose to devote themselves to democratic ideals (Gee, 1999b, 2005, 2013; Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 2001).

### **Background and Conceptual Framework:**

#### **Challenging Privatization's Core Policy Rationales**

Global trade agreements over the past 2 decades have defined education as a marketable service and reshaped the construct of the learner into a lifelong consumer of technical skills and knowledge (Gibb & Walker, 2013; Scott, 2006; Polster & Newson, 2015; Fanelli & Meades, 2011). A dramatic withdraw of state funding during the 1990s, especially on the part of the federal government, resulted in leaner institutions and a proliferation of corporate managerial practices and administrative structures (Mount & Belanger, 2004; Shanahan & Jones, 2007; Shaker et al., 2013). Whereas education is constitutionally primarily a provincial area of jurisdiction, both levels of government have focused on fostering greater “consistency” while ignoring the importance of local community networks and forms of knowledge. In practice, this has meant an effort on the part of provincial governments to develop policy responses to this artificial funding crisis by issuing restructuring policies and accountability initiatives. The shift is in large part one that moves the state to the role of consumer protection and policing “free markets” and away from any endorsement of the notion that students are future critical citizens with the capacity for social agency (Lynch, 2006).

By tying university funding to policy reform, the state has been able to effectively encourage a shift in emphasis on accountability measures, labour market training, and the privatization of large parts of the public education sector (Bruneau & Savage, 2004; Levin, 2003). The cumulative effect of these reforms is to create institutions in which faculty governance is in decline and “[t]rust in professional integrity and peer regulation has been replaced with performance indicators” (Lynch, 2006, p. 7). There are also many non-governmental organizations that have great influence in Canadian post-secondary education and have played a role in promoting the current reform agendas, such as the Canadian Council for Public—Private Partnerships, the C.D. Howe Institute, the Fraser Institute, the Business Council on National Issues (BCNI), and the Canadian Corporate-Higher Education Forum (C-HEF) (Brownlee, 2016; Davidson-Harden & Majhanovich, 2004).

At the same time, the Canadian post-secondary sector has also witnessed the readjustment of the traditional faculty governance structures in the university with a dramatic proliferation of the number of senior staff, managers, and consultants, along with a telling rise in corporate representation on boards of governors, advisory boards, and councils (Polster & Newson, 2015). Similarly, for university faculty, the dramatic restructuring of granting agencies to align industry objectives with university research agendas has lent them increasing importance in a competitive era of declining resources (Kezar et al., 2005). Despite the fiscal accountability discourse that accompanied these changes, and despite the rapid increase in university tuition, the public continues to subsidize a significant proportion of the growing number of commercial research partnerships (Shaker et al., 2013; Polster, 2005). Equally problematic are the rise of corporate faculty chairs or partnerships with commercial partners where universities hold equity

positions in companies that are conducting research and that raise similar conflicts of interest (Krimsky, 2014; Fanelli & Meades, 2011).

Increasingly, then, Canadian universities have become preoccupied with an institutional mission centered on knowledge entrepreneurship, quality assurance, and managerialism (Mount & Belanger, 2004). Focusing on student welfare can give the impression that universities are becoming more democratic and less elitist, but students not only are consumers in the reorganized university but also represent a type of learner that can stand in for commercial rather than critical intellectual values. Indeed, privatization encourages what Gee (2000) termed “affinity groups” of credential-consumers to replace more traditional institutional identities centered around academic and social citizenship. This is because within contemporary corporate capitalism “the highest and most important form of sociotechnical designing involves designing new workplaces and new workers” (Gee, 1999b, p. 64). In the “new capitalism” workers need to be flexible and adaptable, and to share a communal identity that forecloses any possibility of a critical agency that can be turned against broader private capital networks (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 2001):

The new capitalism . . . leads to good, if risky, rewards for those who have sophisticated sociotechnical knowledge to sell (the people Reich calls “symbol analysts”). It leads to fairly meagre financial rewards (though, perhaps, more control and meaning at work) for those who can work in sociotechnical designed environments by the canons of new capitalist work teams—people . . . called “enchanted workers.” However, a developed economy needs—and, in a “lean and mean” environment,” can pay for—only so many symbol analysts and enchanted workers. . . . Large numbers of less fortunate souls must be exploited in order to make a company, region, or country “hypercompetitive” in our global economy. Thus, for large numbers of people in the developed world, and many more in the “less developed” world, the new capitalism is leading to, at best, very poor pay and work conditions in “service work,” “temporary work,” “brute work,” the remaining back-water jobs of the old capitalist businesses, and multiple jobs that do not together add up to a living wage. (Gee, 1999b, p. 66)

Gee's comments demonstrate the importance of identity, both as a form of ideological control and as a means of creating empowered critical social agents (Gee, 2014, 2013, 2015). Affinity identities and their associated spaces are non-hierarchical, they respect tacit and informal knowledge, and they insist on the importance of being able to move across rigid institutional boundaries (Gee, 2005, 2013). In Gee's (2005) words, "in an affinity space, people relate to others primarily in terms of common interests, endeavours, goals or practices, not primarily in terms of race, gender, age, disability, or social class" (p. 225). Whereas community membership can restrict participation by creating status hierarchies that limit the pursuit of shared goals, affinity spaces are interactive, participatory, non-hierarchical and enable knowledge to be collaboratively created and distributed through shared representational practices and experimental forms of social interaction. The notion of affinity space helps to provide insight into groups that are perhaps too loosely structured to be communities but more closely resemble the fluid and social nature of online spaces where knowledge is pooled and participants gain a sense of group identity by commitment to shared group goals (Gee, 2013). Unfortunately, at the center of the current privatization agenda is a vision of the student as credential-consumer that ignores any important role for civic or ethical agency for tomorrow's democratic citizens. By creating tomorrow's "enchanted workers" (Gee, 1999b, p. 66) student-centered discourses legitimize a neoliberal educational agenda defined by corporate partners and the consumers of post-secondary educational services that collectively serve to ensure the ongoing suffocation of higher education's public civic tradition.

## **The Decline of Higher Education as a Public Good**

Although much scholarship has analyzed the ongoing privatization agenda in higher education, comparatively little work has examined how reform discourse operates to further structural and ideological contradictions related to the role of the state and private industry in university restructuring (Turk, 2000; Polster & Newson, 2015; Woodhouse, 2009; Tudiver, 1999). Accordingly, discourse analysis will be used to examine some of these neoliberal tactics and manoeuvres within contemporary higher education. Discourse analysis is a critical practice that analyzes how the linguistic features of texts reinforce certain structural inequalities and ideological effects (Gee, 1999a, 2005; Luke, 2004; Uzuner-Smith & Englander, 2015). It examines how texts employ representations to create new ideological frameworks for human social action and agency (Gee, 1999a, 2005; Luke, 2004; Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005).

Applying this method to recent policy documents, it becomes apparent that government actors justify the privatization of post-secondary education by appealing to the public good, even as they abdicate their oversight role and help to dismantle a core civic institution (Hemsley-Brown, 2011; Kezar et al., 2005; Kwong, 2000). In part, this paradox is rationalized through a conception of freedom dominated by a vocabulary of private rights and morally sanctioned economic privilege (Hemsley-Brown, 2011). Within this paradigm, one of the chief public goods is the individual's economic freedom, a term that according to the Fraser Institute, in a document entitled *Economic Freedom of the World: 2014 Annual Report*, encompasses the virtues of "personal choice, voluntary exchange, freedom to enter markets and compete, and security of the person and privately owned property" (Gwartney, Lawson, & Hall, 2014, p. v). The logic is consistent with the overall ideological aims of neoliberalism, where the end game is a system in

which “the government protects property rights and arranges for the provision of a limited set of ‘public goods’ such as national defense and access to money of sound value, but little beyond these core functions” (p. 1).

One of the key discursive tactics of this neoliberal reform agenda is to ignore the possibility of creating a more well-balanced and effective faculty governance model and the historical struggle to maintain and protect academic rights. Rather than a community of scholars and learners working in institutions grounded in their own unique histories and visions, the emphasis in this new paradigm is on economic utility and hierarchical governance (Kezar et al., 2005). It also ignores the fact that traditional universities were set up around an ideal of academic freedom that also entails important faculty responsibilities related to upholding high standards of teaching, research, service, and participation in effective and deliberative institutional governance (Hogan & Trotter, 2013). As Hogan and Trotter (2013) point out, politicians and citizens alike need to be reminded of the importance of “the need to appropriate self-governing and monitoring within the university so that faculty continue to control the academic agenda in accordance with a bicameral structure” (p. 70).

A core assumption of many post-secondary policy frameworks, is that privatization and the adoption of free market practices will ensure the advancement of democratic principles by promoting the ability of individual consumers to choose how to fulfil their own individual needs (Kwong, 2000). As Newson (2015) convincingly maintains, “the substitution of the contractual rights of consumers for the democratic rights of citizens is a sleight of hand: contractual rights do not provide students with the basis for actively participating in shaping either the content of what they learn, or the context in which they learn it” (p. 200). Yet, nonetheless, reform advocates conveniently ignore deep and widespread conflicts of interest caused by a growing private



influence in the provision of university services, the sponsorship of faculty chairs, and research partnerships with powerful corporate actors (Fanelli & Meades, 2011; Krimsky, 2014).

Also conspicuously absent from many of these policy documents is the idea that current socio-economic realities can be shaped by critical citizens, suggesting that the ideal of economic freedom has supplanted any lingering moral concern over the educational system's failure to enhance social cooperation in furtherance of social justice (Hemsley-Brown, 2011). The well-known *Ontario: A Leader in Learning* (Rae, 2005) report (i.e., the Rae Review) for instance, does not mention the word democracy once. This is not uncommon, if one does even a cursory review of recent post-secondary white papers that omit any reference to research or scholarship that emphasizes higher education's civic and democratic mission. The word citizen occurs twice in the report, but within the context of describing how resources used for the report are made publicly available to encourage transparency (Rae, 2005, p. 112) and of making residents aware of the increasingly important global context of higher education (Rae, 2005, p. 57). The report also mirrors a broader trend whereby the emphasis on accessibility often takes a back seat to that of institutional retention and of ignoring the dramatic increases in student debt levels and tuition increases over the past 25 years (Shaker et al., 2013).

Despite the prevalence of terms like accountability and transparency, many neoliberal reform initiatives portray university autonomy as one of the principle causes of a prevailing institutional environment of waste, privilege, and "benign neglect" (Rae, 2005, p. 5). In this way the language of the business world, with terms like "targets," "mission statements," and "outcomes" is given a moral dimension, while higher education's civic and democratic functions are conveniently ignored (Smith, 2014). Interestingly, even though many policy reports argue that market reforms are needed to make universities more efficient, new intermediary bodies are

also proposed to ensure effective quality management procedures and to organize the ongoing process of reform (Sossin, 2005). The Rae Review and the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario that it established as part of the Ontario provincial government's *Reaching Higher* (Government of Ontario, 2005) 6-year plan, helped to crystalize an accountability agenda in Canadian higher education (Fisher, Rubenson, Shanahan & Trottier, 2014). The Strategic Mandate Agreements that are a part of *Ontario's Differentiation Policy Framework for Postsecondary Education* (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2013) also tie university funding directly to the institution's willingness to meet government defined outcomes and targets. Likewise, while beneficial to students, credit transfer agreements like the *Ontario College-University Degree Completion Accord* (CUCC, 1999) are emblematic of a growing tendency to define the university's role in reference to the needs of an increasingly integrated post-secondary education service sector. One of the key results of the Rae Report was to serve as a catalyst for a renewed state activism couched in terms of transparency and accountability but in reality casting students as under-realized human capital and future workers in need of practical skills training in an increasingly competitive globalized labour market (Kirby, 2007, 2008, 2011).

More recently a new Ontario government report titled *Focus on Outcomes, Centre on Students: Perspectives on Evolving Ontario's University Funding Model*, made a dramatic call to implement outcomes-based funding for all of the province's universities (Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2015). Indeed, this focus on learning outcomes and the new funding model whereby individual post-secondary institutions must have a Strategic Mandate Agreement approved by the province has provided a renewed sense of urgency to the drive for increased financial sustainability, greater efficiency, international competitiveness, and higher enrolments

(Lennon, Skolnik, & Jones, 2015). In the report, student success is largely defined in terms of student satisfaction with the delivery of “quality” educational services that lead to employment in a globally competitive labour market. Not surprisingly, then, the past two decades of reform with its emphasis on cost-efficiency and meeting labour market demands has resulted in a rapid expansion of enrolment, with most of the staffing demands being met by outsourcing teaching to sessional and contractually limited appointments (Lennon et al., 2015). Despite their detrimental impact upon institutional autonomy, these changes are often rationalized through the discourse of student-choice, flexible delivery of educational services, and the need to enhance the public good by increasing economic competitiveness and ensuring the efficient use of public funds spent on higher education. In contrast, traditional universities are portrayed as an elitist privileged “empire of silos,” which forecloses any possibility of broader public participation and encourages waste of scarce fiscal resources (Rae, 2005, p. 15).

Quality, then, becomes a means of ensuring that the reduction in state funding does not lead to a knowledge production crisis as the core teaching functions of universities are increasingly given over to an insecure academic precariat (Kezar et al., 2005). At the top of the faculty hierarchy, merit pay, teaching remissions, and intellectual property rights have become the new status currency, as the university shifts emphasis to focus upon knowledge entrepreneurship and servicing self-interested educational consumers. These rapidly steepening status hierarchies are not natural or inevitable but need to be critically examined. Yet, despite the growing need for reflexive institutional analysis, “because most academics do not see how administrative practices reorganize the social relations within which they are implicated, their reactions to these practices help perpetuate and intensify these transformations and the difficulties they produce” (Polster & Newson, 2015, p. 361).

### **The Strategic Role of Consumer Learner Identities**

Contrary to the widespread conception that Canada is a country with a high degree of social mobility, it now has the fifth highest post-secondary tuition fees among OECD member nations (Shaker et al., 2013, p. 17). Undoubtedly, students have become one of the post-secondary sector's primary revenue sources, meaning that government rhetoric has underscored the importance of providing their consumers with quality educational services (Shaker et al., 2013). Increasingly, Canadian universities are adopting pedagogical frameworks centered around a depoliticized construct of the abstract "learner," or even "a learner centered society," where educational consumerism and competitive individualism have replaced longstanding ideals associated with personal growth and intellectual transformation. The problem with this, as Janice Newson (2015) insists, is that "to the extent that colleges and universities have accommodated . . . this cultural shift—their ways of communicating with, providing services for, and monitoring the progress of their student bodies—students do not experience, nor are they exposed to visible manifestations of, education as a social and cultural space that is distinct from the world of commerce" (p. 205).

Learner centered rhetoric is also prolific in jurisdictions like Alberta where privatization reforms and the downloading of educational cost onto student-consumers have gained clear momentum. *A Learning Alberta: Quality in Alberta's Advanced Education System* was issued soon after the enactment of the Post-secondary Learning Act, 2003, that established the Campus Alberta Quality Council and integrated prior legislation that had treated colleges and universities as separate and distinct statutory entities (Ministry of Advanced Education, 2006). As we see from one of its predecessors, *Campus Alberta: A Policy Framework* (Ministry of Advanced Education, 2002), the emphasis of these post-secondary reform initiatives is largely placed upon

economic competitiveness, quality assurance, and strategic funding to meet labour market demands. The Campus Alberta Quality Council was set up to implement the provisions of the Post-secondary Learning Act, 2003, as well as the Canada-wide *Ministerial Statement on Quality Assurance of Degree Education in Canada* issued by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, in 2007, which provides for ongoing quality assessment and periodic review of post-secondary programming. The council is also a member of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and is a part of the broader international push toward promoting a more technicist conception of post-secondary education that seeks to build quality assurance measures into the accreditation process for new post-secondary institutions and programs.

Unfortunately, enhanced accessibility has come at the cost of higher tuition and mounting student debt, despite the emphasis on outcomes-based funding, workplace skills and performance based indicators (Brownlee, 2015). Although policy documents like the *Roles and Mandates Policy Framework for Alberta's Public Funded Advanced Education System* appear to encourage institutional integration and cooperation, this often simply means standardizing program offerings and state sanctioned quality assurance measures to create a well-integrated educational service delivery sector for educational consumers (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007). The Six Sector Model set out in the *Roles and Mandates Policy Framework* establishes a hierarchy of post-secondary institutions with research intensive institutions at the top and ties funding to government approved institutional mandates. Similarly, the related Alberta Innovates initiative, “encourage[s] alignment of Campus Alberta research plans with the government’s research and innovation priorities” in order to promote the production of marketable intellectual property and private-public research partnerships (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology,

2011, p. 3-3). Although students are described as the “beneficiaries” of these reforms, decision making power primarily resides in centralized government agencies and intermediary bodies like the Campus Alberta Strategic Directions Committee meaning that there is very little deliberative decision making involving student or faculty “stakeholders.” This state of affairs stands in marked contrast to the idealistic vision described in *A Learning Alberta* whose authors assure the province’s citizens that “in a learner centered society, the learning choices and aspirations of individual learners are understood, respected, and addressed. They are at the very core of the learning system and are inspired and supported by learning organizations and communities” (Ministry of Advanced Education, 2006, p. 9).

Curiously, learner centered discourse focuses on the institution when it is employed in policy reports but says little about how students’ critical agency might reshape the institution along more deliberative, democratic lines. Student participation—as a substitute for authentic agency—is emphasized at the classroom level, in terms of active learning and instructional feedback, but not at the institutional level, where students are simply told what is best for them. The language of learning needs replaces a public discourse about democratic principles and collaborative forms of institutional governance—the latter terms being seen as too idealistic and removed from pressing economic realities. In other words, rhetoric that purports to focus on the learner’s needs ignores the fact that those needs are primarily defined for the learner and largely represent those of global labour markets.

Yet *A Learning Alberta* very much echoes ideals of solidarity and mutual support. For instance, the audience is told that “in a true learning society, community capacity continues to grow and respond to the emerging needs of its learners, and the entire system is responsive and adaptable in a timely manner” (Ministry of Advanced Education, 2006, p. 18). This emphasis on

the learner without any reference to participation in institutional decision-making hides the political aspects of the restructuring of university governance. Even though learners are assured they are living in an era of lifelong learning, when education is a continual process of adapting to ever-changing labour market demand, they are not told that this goes hand in hand with a precarious existence characterized by sporadic employment, credential inflation, and the interminable expense of continuous retraining (Brownlee, 2015). These learner centered organizations, have very little in common with democratic learning communities that allow all members of the community to have a say in the outcome of decisions that have significant impact on their interests and rights.

An important part of this new administrative model is the process of government approved strategic planning that is used to outline the universities proposed direction for improving enrolment, reducing costs, and delivering quality programming (Fisher et al., 2014). Like Ontario, British Columbia, through documents like *Campus 2020: Thinking Ahead* (Plant, 2007), has led the push to privatize post-secondary institutions and re-orientate their public counterparts toward research in the applied and technical sciences, where there is increasing market demand (Plant, 2007; Kirby, 2007). Although the emphasis on enhanced accountability and employability are far from new (Dennison & Schuetze, 2004), many of the proposed reforms threaten to undermine institutional autonomy by giving clear priority to market-based decision making. Already using a combination of base and strategic funding, *Campus 2020* recommends tying tuition fees to a cost of education price index up to a tuition ceiling set by the provincial government. The combination of strategic funding tied to investment of areas of high market demand and recommendations for more outcomes-based curricula and performance based funding will likely lead to greater “oversight” of post-secondary institutions in the years ahead.

Here, once again the emphasis is placed upon meeting learners' diverse needs through the measurement of quality control outcomes and the very specialized reporting requirements of an extensive Accountability Framework and Access and Excellence Strategy. A clear emphasis has also been placed upon quality assurance, accreditation requirements, and credit transfers through the BC Credit Transfer system and the Degree Quality Assessment Board.

As in Alberta, reforms in B.C. have also tended to reinforce the status differentiation between institutions that focus on teaching as opposed to more research intensive universities (Levin, Aliyeva & Walker, 2016). *Campus 2020* proposed the creation of two new intermediary bodies that represent top tier administrators in the post-secondary system (Higher Education President's Council) and an advisory council (Higher Education Board) made up of private and public representatives who supposedly represent broader community interests (Plant, 2007, p. 27). Yet, nonetheless, accessibility is primarily about the right to vote with one's tuition dollars in an education system where governance decisions are made by bureaucrats and intermediary organizations that oversee the implementation of production targets and learning outcomes (Kirby, 2007). A key principle is the idea that it is the government's responsibility to ensure that the public obtains the best value for its money through a system of performance indicators that can purportedly be unproblematically applied to any institutional setting (Plant, 2007, p. 80).

Accountability is also encouraged through institution-specific budgets and mandate letters that provide the Ministry of Advanced Education with much more latitude in being able to shape university policy. By improving quality and safeguarding public resources, these neoliberal policies claim to serve the public good by setting accreditation requirements and monitoring educational outcomes (Lynch, 2006). Unlike the supposedly elitist and complacent universities of the past, today's learners are told they will witness the dawn of a new era in which



entire provinces will become “campus[es] of learning” and all of the knowledge produced by the public institution will be made available for public dissemination (Plant, 2007, p. 92). The totality of this corporate vision reminds us of the need to seriously explore “Gadamer’s distinction between the idea of the university and its current manifestation in reality to explore with students the possibility of creating ‘free space’ in the classroom for enacting the university as a ‘living with ideas’” (Newson, 2015, p. 208).

In light of all these pressing realities, the public is told that the system must act quickly so that “the entire sector . . . government, public institutions and their regulatory and decision-making processes will . . . adopt the characteristics of learning organizations: flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness, or what one contributor described as ‘nimbleness’” (Plant, 2007, p. 10). Under the guise of creating “student-centered learning organizations” commercialization undermines any meaningful possibility of critical civic agency. The key criterion of educational success are superficial “quality” metrics and return on the public’s tax dollars, at least as far as the outputs related to teaching, retention, and student satisfaction are concerned (Brownlee, 2015; Bruneau & Savage, 2004; Fisher, Rubenson, Jones, & Shanahan, 2009). By promoting privatization through institutions that derive their meaning from their ability to fulfill student needs, we are left wondering who decides what students need and how students will learn to question the prerogatives of markets? Public goods have less and less of a role in this broader neoliberal framework, since, as noted by the Fraser Institute in one of its annual reports on global economic freedom, “individuals have a right to their own time, talents, and resources, but they do not have a right to take things from others or demand that others provide things for them” (Gwartney et al., 2014, pp. 1–2).

Collectively, then, document analysis reveals how proposed reforms in these three provinces reflects a broader neoliberal educational agenda in higher education that relies on accountability initiatives, the outsourcing of educational services, and diminished autonomy for public universities as state funding becomes tied to the satisfaction of market demand (Kirby, 2011; Lynch, 2006; Turk, 2000; Woodhouse, 2009). Although there has been some headway on accessibility for students with disabilities and for Aboriginal education—particularly in British Columbia—many challenges remain to ensure that students receive an education that is critical and comprehensive, as well as accessible and affordable. More specifically we have seen how these documents embody three broader trends whereby:

1. policy planning is transferred to the state, which acts primarily to further the needs of powerful private interests;
2. accountability initiatives and performance-based funding are utilized to curb academic freedom and to ensure that neoliberal reforms become tied to the everyday academic workplace demands; and
3. consumer choice becomes a stand-in for public democratic values as market needs increasingly drive programming and research agendas and intellectuals become increasingly distanced from critical public engagement.

Most of these policy aims can be achieved by promoting a consumer-based model of the student that makes the university function simply as a more specialized site of knowledge production that serves the needs of global labour markets. The cumulative result of these reforms may be a radically decentered university institution that is controlled by fiscal means to ensure that powerful corporate interests are not made subservient to social justice concerns. Quite simply it maintains that learning in the university is the same as learning anywhere else, and that simply the efficient transfer and production of marketable technical knowledge is the institution's primary functional objective. Under the guise of promoting student interests, students are being robbed of their democratic agency and saddled with ever-mounting levels of consumer debt in a

viscous cycle that only genuine agency and critical solidarity between concerned groups of citizens can end.

### **Popular Education and Public Affinity Movements**

Recent policy documents have tended to embody a utilitarian, market-based model of post-secondary education where administrative reforms that ostensibly serve learners' interests have instead seriously undermined the core traditions of faculty governance and institutional autonomy (Fisher et al., 2009). Equally disturbing are the increasing number of position papers that call for market-driven skills training and performance based funding in higher education, setting the stage for an even more dramatic erosion of institutional autonomy in the years ahead (Kirby, 2007, 2011). As Polster and Newson (2015) emphasize, it is important to remember that "the changes in social relations . . . are troubling not because they diminish professors' entitlements, but because they undermine faculty's ability (and, arguably, also administrators' ability) to fulfil the academic mission which simultaneously serves their own interests and the general public interest" (p. 362). As is evident from the quality assurance emphasis being promoted at the international level by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it is important to realize that these changes are closely related to globalization initiatives that mimic efficiency measures found in industry and that is currently coordinating efforts to restructure higher education as a market-driven knowledge service industry (Harvey, 2008; Kirby, 2007, 2008; UNESCO, 2005).

Despite the fact that neoliberal privatization discourses have typecast the traditional university as inefficient and elitist, it remains crucially important to emphasize that faculty rights

like academic freedom are “premised on the expectation that the professoriate will self-regulate and participate in institutional governance” (Hogan & Trotter, 2013, p. 71). Faculty, university leaders, and concerned citizens need to emphasize the unique role of the public university in democratic society as they demand closer scrutiny of neoliberal claims about the inevitability of structural reforms and provide students with a clear voice in this process (Woodhouse, 2009; Tudiver, 1999; Turk, 2000). Collectively, faculty must educate the public about the benefits of a bicameral governance model that recognizes academic freedom and provides for debate and dissent within the broader context of a self-governing intellectual community (Woodhouse, 2009; Tudiver, 1999; Turk, 2000). Although massification has been tied to the rise of educational consumerism, it also represents an opportunity to integrate critical intellectual movements through greater solidarity with activists and public intellectuals throughout broader society. This will require learning on the part of both students and faculty as students are taught the value of institutional autonomy and democracy and faculty come to see the need to take a more active role in teaching critical intellectual values at a time when they are increasingly under threat.

But there are signs of hope. Hints of a resurgence of interest in a university that can serve as a center for critical intellectual values by creating solidarity within affinity-type spaces can be found in institutions like public interest research groups (PIRGs). Originating in the United States in the 1970s, but currently having student-run chapters in Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Nova Scotia, PIRGs are activist organizations that conduct research and coordinate social action with issues related to economic inequality, the environment, racism, gender equity, and the corporatization of higher education. As a part of a broader Public Interest Network, these non-profit organizations are based on autonomous consensus based decision-making and rely on public education to promote action on social

issues. This network of activist organizations focuses on providing students and all citizens with knowledge and skills that enable collective action and broad solidarity. These initiatives need to be contextualized in promising signs for a more focused student-activism, as was demonstrated by the Quebec Maple Spring protests in 2012, the aftermath of the G20 protests in Toronto, and recent strikes in York University, the University of Toronto, and the University of Manitoba that saw students join forces with contract staff and—to a lesser degree—regular faculty. Similar examples of more broad-based solidarity can be seen in protests and awareness initiatives related to anti-globalization, sexual violence, LGBT rights, Aboriginal issues, and environmentalism—particularly the fossil fuel divestiture movement.

A similar promising affinity-based movement that combines activism and public intellectual values includes the American-based Campaign for the Future of Higher Education that includes the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) as a partner. The campaign includes a large number of faculty associations and professional organizations and holds events to raise awareness about structural trends and reforms that threaten the integrity and accessibility of public higher education. Working papers and research conducted by the campaign provide an important counter-discourse to neoliberal policies by challenging tuition increases, privatization, the decline in faculty governance models, accountability initiatives, and the outsourcing and deskilling of university teaching. Expanding the role of the campaign in Canadian campuses (Pimlott, 2014) and forging greater links with organizations like PIRGs through more community-based and activist citizenship education is one way of combatting today's privatization agenda. Other similar organizations that emphasize democratic engagement in higher education and that offer useful models for Canadian initiatives include the National

Forum on Education for the Public Good based at the University of Michigan and the Democracy Collaborative at the University of Maryland (Kezar et al., 2005).

At the institutional level, it is increasingly important to emphasize that the faculty governance model implies responsibilities as well as rights, including most importantly the ethical obligation to support and further critical intellectual spaces through public engagement. Post-secondary educators and administrators need to foster opportunities for public engagement by using tools such as community service learning to apply institutional knowledge in a way that is critical, communal, and rooted in broader culture. As part of this effort, work on social justice must be extended to universities themselves as sites that contain hierarchies, social practices, and forms of inequity that often reflect those found in broader society including student debt and the proletarianization of contingent academic labour. Likewise, student-centered learning can be given a more critical and outward looking emphasis by taking advantage of community-service learning and inquiry-based learning to bring university knowledge to bear on social problems in a way that represent deeper and more far-reaching forms of student and faculty collaboration. Action research provides a similar tool, especially in program areas that have a social justice emphasis.

As part of this renewed focus, faculty must also mentor students in the tradition of academic citizenship by emphasizing that participation in public higher education implies important responsibilities for all intent on protecting the ideals of free inquiry and democratic citizenship (Kezar et al., 2005). Reversing privatization's harmful structural trends requires the radical reform of the university from within by faculty who are committed to creating affinity identities that will redefine those institutions. This includes building broad-based coalitions through which they can share their institutional power and encourage the creation of affinity

spaces that promote critical activism by engaged public intellectuals. For faculty this is also about the ethical responsibility of being entrusted with a vital public good at a time when it is increasingly under attack within a system which must adapt not by replacing intellectual values with commercial ones, but by discarding its traditional elitism for a more challenging critical public mission. These are ideals that constitute the basis for renewed forms of solidarity that the privatization agenda is desperate to disrupt, and that those who care deeply about the institution are so increasingly eager to embrace before their remaining vestiges are irrevocably erased. The crucial outcome for committed academics at this historical juncture, then, is simply to engender new forms of critical solidarity that gesture beyond the blind hand of free markets and towards a common ungovernable hope.

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