

The Corporate Analogy Unravels

By Andrew Ross

The term "corporate university" barely raises an eyebrow these days. That is unfortunate. It's perfectly fine for a collegial kvetch around the department water cooler, but it's not all that helpful for analyzing how institutions like ours are being restructured. In fact, the term is a lazy shorthand for understanding the changes coursing through higher education.

Admittedly, there is a pile of evidence to support the idea that universities have gone corporate. The casualization of the academic work force is the most obvious—arguably, the loss of professional job security has occurred at a rate faster than in any other occupational sector. The polarization in salaries is another example of marketization: The ratio of executive compensation to the pay of the average adjunct instructor bears comparison with that in most top-down corporations. So too have universities, like corporations, gone offshore, cutting costs, spreading assets, and polishing their brands in "emerging markets." The shift in attention and funds toward commercially relevant fields has also been quite pronounced, and the production of a jumbo pool of student debt has made universities into vehicles, if not instruments, for bankers' profits. Some of the most delicious watercooler tales emphasize how our administrators are adopting managerial techniques from corporate America.

But there the analogy begins to unravel. At my own university—no slouch when it comes to entrepreneurial moves—the administration recently introduced a "re-engineering" campaign to cut costs and improve managerial efficiency. Transplants from the corporate world might have concluded they were in a time warp. After all, the heyday of the managerial fad known as "reengineering" was in the early 1990s, sparked by Michael Hammer and James Champy's *Reengineering the Corporation: A Manifesto for Business Revolution* (HarperBusiness, 1993).

But doesn't that just illustrate that higher education (like the armed forces) is a late adopter of cutting-edge corporate strategies? Well, not exactly. Champy and Hammer's ideas were an important driver of the "lean and mean" phase of corporate restructuring, and one of the outcomes was the drastic thinning out of middle-management ranks. Corporations became much flatter, as managerial responsibilities were pushed down onto the desks, laptops, and BlackBerrys of nonmanagerial employees. Yet the evidence is that the opposite is occurring in higher education. The amassing of administrative ranks is on a steady upward swing, as more and more middle managers are added to college payrolls. Nor are regular faculty members being asked to take on managerial responsibilities. If anything, the additional tasks they are given—mostly gathering data—are routine in nature.

At New York University, the administration seems to model itself more on Washington than on Wall Street. Our president has a "chief of staff" and often recruits officials from the federal government; the senior administrators of our new Abu Dhabi campus are referred to as the "senior cabinet." NYU, of course, enjoys a metropolitan location that is attractive to bureaucrats looking to trade in their Georgetown digs for a Manhattan ZIP code. But even for colleges without that geographical advantage, the steady increase in administrator-to-faculty ratios bears more of a resemblance to the thickening of a government bureaucracy than to any corporate leadership structure.

Further evidence for the political model can be found in the galloping erosion of shared governance in higher education. Instead of enjoying their full traditional role in governance, faculty members are increasingly likely to be "consulted" about decision making, and more and more on an ad hoc basis. Again, the model of voluntary solicitation is more akin to the internal workings of government agencies than modern corporations. It is geared more to shoring up and protecting power at the top than to encouraging ideas and innovations that will improve company market position.

The root problem with the way we invoke the "corporate university" is that academics tend to have a fixed, undifferentiated idea of what "corporate" means. In reality, corporations are fast-mutating species, constantly looking to reinvent themselves, rolling out "re-orgs" periodically, and experimenting with workflows at a rate that academic culture (even the most entrepreneurial) would never tolerate. Nor have we fully absorbed the degree to which corporations, and especially businesses that trade on knowledge or ideas, have adopted many features of the traditional academic work mentality: open speech, the 24/7 cycle of generating ideas, the loose, overlapping live-work schedule, the custom of sharing knowledge—even the need for sabbaticals. For many corporations, the work tempo of academics is zealously advocated as a model for their high-wage employees.

So, at the very least, the traffic is two-way. Indeed, I am inclined to see the relationship between research universities and knowledge corporations best described not as converging, but as coevolving, with each morphing into new and ever-expanding institutional forms. One example of the way the sectors appear to run in tandem is the emphasis on intellectual property, which is more and more the coin of the realm in advanced economies. The pursuit of revenue from intellectual property is now also increasingly common in academe. But, unlike in the corporate sphere, there are limits to how far higher education will go in turning knowledge into a private revenue stream. Just as industrial capitalism depended on free inputs from nature—air, water, and fossil fuels—so too knowledge capitalism depends on freely exploiting ideas and nonpatented research generated by the exercise of academic freedom.

Last but not least, there are some aspects of education that just don't fit industrial models of profit. Though speculative investors in higher education would like to see it treated as a tradable service (under WTO rules), it doesn't really resemble other services. For one thing, the quality of the product in education depends heavily on the hard work of the client. Students have to participate fully and perform well for the outcome to be satisfactory. One could think of a few other sectors—therapy and certain sex work—where clients have to labor to get a result, but none require recipients of the service to undergo the wholesale disciplining and self-development that education does.

It has been argued that capitalism's ultimate goal is eliminating wage labor and asking us all to work for nothing, whether as "prosumers" (consumers who do more and more of the work that producers used to pay employees for) or amateur content-providers (for corporate news organizations or userbased Web sites). With chronic joblessness all around us, and corporate profits buoyant, that is certainly an attractive thesis. Indeed, I would predict that unpaid labor is going to become more and more the norm in high-consumption economies like ours. Is higher education a good fit for that profile?

Yes and no. On the teaching side, all the sacrificial labor that we instructors perform "for the love of our subject" is readily available to be exploited. But on the learning side, things are more cloudy. In his book *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (NYU Press, 2008), Marc Bousquet, a professor at Santa Clara University, and a blogger for *The Chronicle*, has shown how our undergraduates are increasingly treated as sources of cheap labor, performing many essential service functions—cafeteria, laundry, landscaping, clerical—at discount prices. But the kind of work that students do at the core of their education—reading, writing, listening, thinking, debating, and experimenting—does not strike me as fitting the model of free labor. I'm not quite at the point of concluding that such a work profile is indifferent, even resistant, to the newest modes of extracting profit, but it's one of many parts of academe that don't fold neatly into the bag of the corporate university.

Like many of the labels brandished by activists, the "corporate university" is very good for consciousness raising, but it doesn't hold up so well under closer scrutiny. For academics who believe that the birthright of their profession is being sold off, and that we are witnessing deprofessionalization of the majority of faculty members, it is salutary to feel that there is a single, sulfurous logic responsible for our woes. Let's remember that it wasn't so long ago that the military's ties to universities were the primary target of faculty anxieties. U.S. Defense Department money for academic research has declined since the era when it more or less bankrolled the rise of the postwar research university, but all the new attention to dodgy contracts with corporations has sidelined the

substantial influence that the Pentagon still exerts on the physical sciences and on "softer" fields that fall within the orbit of national security. To be effective advocates for the profession and for the cause of education, we need to recognize that our workplaces are subject to more than one gravitational force, and also that universities exert their own pull on other sectors.

In the cold-war heyday, C. Wright Mills argued that the exercise of power in the United States was shaped by "interlocking directorates" drawn from corporations, the government, and the military. Mills's thesis, while cogent for its time, could use an update. Research universities are becoming independent drivers of the economy—stimulating growth and development rather than merely providing trained labor and research. In so doing, they are forging their own influential directorates. Nongovernmental organizations will very likely follow suit. At that point, the tripartite model that Mills set forth in 1956 will have added at least two more prongs. In anticipation of that scenario, we should consider that our universities, far from devolving into mere adjuncts of corporations, will more likely end up as players, in their own right, on a landscape with many hubs.

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