

THE TRULY DIVERSE FACULTY

NEW DIALOGUES IN AMERICAN
HIGHER EDUCATION

Edited by
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*In memory of
Jorge Martínez Cardenas (1945–2012)*

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COMMENT

WHICH WAY FORWARD? THE CORPORATE UNIVERSITY AS A SITE OF CONTRADICTION

Michael Hames-García

I take Nana Osei-Kofi's argument to heart and understand it to be a timely warning against complacency for those of us who consider ourselves to be part of an academic left concerned with social change and not merely with the academic study of society. Toward this end, she gives us a valuable critique of the academy as a location from which to engage in social struggle while also making some suggestions for how it might be made a more effective site. I find her arguments to constitute a generative starting point for an important discussion. One of the chapter's strengths is its broad sweep—that is, its historical scope and its general inclusion of the many different kinds of institutions that make up US academia. That sweep makes the chapter both powerful and thought provoking.

While its generality gives the chapter its strength as a starting point, however, it can limit one's ability to identify and address particular problems with the corporate university. As a result, the discussion requires further elaborations and specifications in order to move forward productively. Those specifications include how to distinguish between public and private institutions; between research-oriented and primarily teaching institutions; among graduate, undergraduate, and two-year colleges and universities; between high-overhead disciplines at research universities (consequently dependent on high levels of research funding) and low-overhead disciplines at those same universities (where significant research funding is scarcer and often unnecessary for basic research and teaching); and between poor institutions (which serve the majority of low-income students and students of color) and wealthy institutions (which largely serve wealthy and white students, although not exclusively).

I would contend that any meaningful discussion of corporatization in academia needs to better make such distinctions because the history of, reasons for, and consequences of academic institutions' turn toward corporate funding and management models will vary in each instance. It also might be worthwhile to consider whether corporate funding and management models necessarily go hand in hand, and if so, in what ways. For example, at comprehensive research-intensive universities, there has been no real movement toward the hiring of presidents from private industry, as demonstrated by the fact that every current president of an institution in the American Association of Universities (AAU) has gone through the process of academic tenure as a professor. On the other hand, Albany State University, whose visiting science education professor advertisement serves as an example for Osei-Kofi, is a historically black institution operating with a financial profile far afield from the institutions comprising the AAU but with a mission to educate African American students. Additionally, the ad is for a position in a field that Osei-Kofi notes is an education subdiscipline where funding is available and it is for a department of education that has a majority of black faculty (certainly an unusual demographic makeup in a national context). All these specifics are important to know in order to think through the possibilities and limitations available to universities, departments, and faculty as they craft their responses to neoliberal pressures.

Since I am not an expert on higher education, I will confine my comments to the type of institutions I have direct experience with as a faculty member, research center director, and department head: public system research universities. In the current budget climate, public institutions have faced a serious crisis of disinvestment. At the University of Oregon, for example, state appropriations have dropped precipitously over the last twenty years. Currently, the UO receives less than 7 percent of its funding from the state (by comparison, Osei-Kofi's own institution, Iowa State University receives 21 percent of its funding from the state, reflecting a drop of 19 percent since 2001).¹ It is instructive to put oneself in the position of a university president or provost and to imagine this scenario, where one's institution has lost tens of millions of dollars in funding over a relatively short period of time. As a result of such budget cuts, university administrators have had to face difficult decisions. Assuming that one believes in the public mission of public higher education, what choices are available for responding to this kind of disinvestment? To be sure, the first line of response for Oregon administrators was to lobby the state legislature, the governor, and the electorate to return the institution to earlier levels of funding. When that failed, as it has in nearly every state where drastic cuts have been made to higher education, administrators had to accept the fact that the university needed to either

seek out new sources of funds or significantly reduce its operation. At the UO, the lead administrators at the university have sought to avoid the termination of staff and faculty positions, while struggling to maintain instructional quality and continuing to support research. As a result, the only option available was to secure funding to replace the reduced state appropriations.

A former administrator with whom I worked closely once said that simply complaining that state funding should return to higher levels does not work. For the most part, legislators do not believe that higher education should be heavily subsidized by the state and neither do voters. Higher education, nationally, has been largely unsuccessful in making its case to either of these groups. That does not mean that we do not continue to try to make the case for increased state funding, but it does mean that—assuming we do not want to close the doors of our state universities—we need to find creative alternatives. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) machines, chemistry labs, graduate student tuition waivers, faculty and staff salaries, computers, copy machines, residence halls, and student support services cost money. That money must come from somewhere, and there is undeniably less of it available than there was ten or twenty years ago. Available sources for funding higher education on a massive scale include the following: (1) state or local governments (often through contracts), (2) student tuition, (3) federal granting agencies (particularly in the sciences through the National Science Foundation [NSF], National Institutes of Health [NIH], National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], National Aeronautics and Space Administration [NASA], etc.), (4) private foundations (often created as philanthropic endeavors by wealthy industry entrepreneurs to fund research within the range of a narrowly or broadly defined mission), (5) businesses and corporations (either through contracts or gifts), and (6) gifts from alumni and other private donors.

At this point, I do not want to entirely dismiss the radical potential of a free university that does not depend on funding from any of the aforementioned sources. I believe that much important work toward social change can perhaps only be accomplished in such a space, and I am aware that successful models of this sort exist throughout the world. However, there are also limits to what they can accomplish. Advanced neuroscience research and astrophysics, for example, would be difficult without extremely high levels of funding for the necessary facilities. Also, the numbers of people who can be educated through alternative means might turn out to be limited, although I do not hold that reservation very deeply. I do want to emphasize that experiments with nonstandard, community-based forms of education are important and necessary. However, I also believe that there remains a place for institutions that

make higher education available to large numbers of students and provide opportunities for basic research across many disciplines.

With its massive infrastructure, the modern university allows for the education of a comparatively large percentage of the population—including an increasingly large share of the working and middle classes—and the advancement of scientific frontiers in virtually every field of knowledge. That infrastructure, however, requires funding that can only come from sources like those previously listed. Some institutions have been extraordinarily successful in obtaining federal funds to support their research and teaching missions as state money has dried up. These tend to be land-grant public institutions and private universities with large schools of medicine and engineering. At such places, the more applied scientific, professional, and technical disciplines with access to funds from federal agencies like NIH and NASA effectively subsidize the fine and performing arts, the humanities, most of the social sciences, and some of the natural sciences. Consequently, research in such disciplines is mostly determined by or at least negotiated with (through university and researcher lobbying) the federal government. As a graduate student and assistant professor in English, I often felt resentful toward the “richer” fields of engineering and the natural sciences, correctly perceiving them as having special perks, better research funding, higher salaries, and lower teaching loads. It was not until I came to understand better how universities function—in particular how they redistribute indirect costs on federal grants—that I understood how the little research funding I did receive had in most cases been effectively reinvested out of money that these “richer” fields had attracted to the institution.

Universities without federal grant cash cows (e.g., the University of Oregon, which has neither a medical school nor a school of engineering) are much more dependent on the remaining sources of funding previously listed: tuition, foundations, corporations, and private donors. Of these, tuition probably comes with the fewest strings attached to it, and therefore can be raised to make money available for faculty research and teaching without the fear that it will be accompanied by demands that curriculum or research agendas need to proceed in particular directions or avoid certain topics. However, increasing tuition to support faculty research is also probably the least ethically acceptable option, and as student debt loads continue to increase, the tuition hikes become more and more controversial and unsustainable (I am especially mindful of this fact as I write this sentence—in Montréal during the summer of 2012, where student protests against tuition increases are a daily event).

Unlike voters and state legislators, some business leaders have turned out to be remarkably sympathetic to the idea that higher education (even *public* higher education) is a social good, and they have responded by

contributing record amounts of money to cash strapped institutions following the withdrawal of public funding. As Osei-Kofi and others have so persuasively shown, corporate sources (including the most significant alumni gifts, those that come in six or seven figures from single donors and make possible the construction of buildings, the funding of large numbers of graduate students, and the endowment of professorships) often come with strings and expectations attached. At the very least, this funding tends to be channeled in the directions of most interest or use to the funding sources (e.g., money for a philosophy department to hire a professor of business ethics), rather than in the direction of greatest intellectual interest (e.g., for a philosophy department to hire a professor of feminist or Latin American philosophy). The relationship of patronage can feel frustrating, annoying, limiting, demeaning, or even abusive. Certainly, my experience as a department head and center director has been one of continual frustration at the need for every funding request to adopt the language of profitability and at being expected to promote my department and center as benefitting the creation of a multicultural workforce. However, the alternative has been for the department to not grow, for there to be fewer faculty teaching and researching about the role of race, class, gender, and sexuality in our society, or worse, for our department to shrink or even cease to exist. Essentially, most of my time in these administrative positions has consisted of trying to convince higher administration and wealthy (often politically conservative) donors that they should pay for what the faculty in ethnic studies does. I could, of course, have chosen not to try to convince them to pay for our work, but then several people would not have been hired and others would have fewer resources to do what they are doing. In short, though, I believe it is important to admit that we in ethnic studies have jobs because rich people who often do not share about politics have been convinced to pay our salaries.

This fact seems particularly strange and remarkable given the history of corporate interest in the creation and expansion of the university outlined in Osei-Kofi's chapter. Is it simply the case that universities have lied to their benefactors in order to fund subversive research? Is it the case that social protest has forced private interests to allow more freedom in universities? Have wealthy industrialists found it prudent to allow some freedom for their political opponents in order to better manage ideological discontent and social unrest? I believe that each of these possibilities is to some extent true. The phenomenon of the university does not fully make sense if we only understand it as a special place of academic freedom (a story Osei-Kofi convincingly dismantles) or as a story of perpetual manipulation and collusion in which the university is simply a tool of corporate interests and programs like ethnic studies are only

strategic concessions to keep students of color from causing trouble and to allow for the recruitment of just enough minority students to give US capital the appearance of equity (a story that Osei-Kofi does not explicitly rule out but that her recommendations suggest she is not committed to either).

In thinking through the kinds of questions that I believe Osei-Kofi's chapter raises, I am inclined to turn to the Marxian concept of contradiction. According to Marx, there are always contradictions inherent to capitalism and capitalist ideology. These contradictions give rise in part to complexities of hegemony theorized by Antonio Gramsci, Mikhail Bakhtin, C. L. R. James, Herbert Marcuse, Américo Paredes, Stuart Hall, and others. They are also illustrated in some recent accounts of the history of public higher education. William Bowen, Martin Kurzweil, and Eugene Tobin, for example, in *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education*, argue that the creation of a vast system of public educational institutions in the United States was justified simultaneously by both a crass interest in creating a work and managerial force adequate to the demands of expanding US capitalism and imperialism and an idealistic interest in democratizing access to learning and social mobility (Bowen, 2005). In her account of Stephen Van Rensselaer, Joseph Wharton, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie, Osei-Kofi gives us an eye-opening view of how the expansion of universities was shaped by the wishes of wealthy industrialists. The history of Andrew Carnegie's involvement in supporting higher education, however, gives us a sense of how "high-minded" ideals about equality of opportunity and about the value of education and art and culture also played a role. According to Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin, Carnegie really believed that it was important for higher education to emphasize both technical disciplines and the arts and humanities, as well as for it to be made available to people from all class backgrounds (Bowen, 2005). The Morrill Land-Grant Acts, which greatly expanded state university systems, also arose from a mélange of varied and sometimes opposing interests, including economic and functionalist ones as well as democratic ones. To understand these ideals as *merely* ideological or as necessary compromises in order to mask the allegedly real mercenary motives of capitalist philanthropists can dangerously overlook the complexity of capitalism. Both sets of motives were real, and they existed in different quantities and relationships to one another in different cases. How the democratic ideals interacted with the baser demands of industrial capitalism is a difficult and important process for us to understand. What kinds of contradictions and fissures developed and what sorts of unexpected phenomena emerged through the tension between democracy and pragmatism?

A standout example would be academic tenure, which has its origins specifically in the freedom of faculty to be critical of corporations and donors who give money to the educational institution that employs them. As a legal obligation to faculty that they cannot be fired without good cause, tenure arose relatively recently from university resistance to undue interference in academic matters by wealthy businesspeople, trustees, regents, and donors. Of course, two recent phenomena have circumvented the academic freedom supplied by tenure. The first, as noted by Osei-Kofi, is the increased necessity of relying on corporations and foundations to sponsor research. This means that research that requires funding must increasingly match up with the interests of those offering funding. It is thus vitally important that educational institutions be reminded that not all important work coincides with the directives of funding agencies and that scholarship (including both teaching and research) should be supported regardless of its monetary exchange value or even the apparent utility of its immediate product. This is as true in the sciences as in the humanities (every scientist knows the story of Barbara McClintock, for example, whose work in genetics was ignored and ridiculed for decades before finally being confirmed by others and recognized with a Nobel Prize). The second circumvention lies in the dwindling percentage of university instructors who actually have tenure or are tenure track. Again, it falls to those of us who care about academic freedom to defend and expand access to tenure and to lobby for the protection of the rights and working conditions of those without tenure.

In other words, it is precisely because capitalism has contradictions—contradictions that are necessary rather than incidental to its existence—and because those contradictions inhere in institutions like the university that we can make sense of the university as an institution worth defending and working to transform, however imperfect it may be in its current form and whatever limits our work within it faces. This is obviously not to say that all our work—or even our most important work—toward creating a more just and egalitarian society can or should happen in the university. However, the contradictions inhering in institutions of higher education (even as they take a neoliberal turn) provide opportunities to work on and in it toward ends that are not necessarily coterminous with neoliberalism. But to do that work, we need to identify the contradictions as well as the aspects of the institution that are working against our ends. Only then can we adequately strategize what to do next.

The foremost of these contradictions, of course, is funding to enable any work at all in the university. As public universities become increasingly dependent on private funding sources, those of us in the humanities and social sciences need to think hard about how to engage with university

mandates for obtaining such funds. Do we try to sell our work to private donors, playing the neoliberal game alongside our colleagues in the sciences and professional schools? Or do we make the case to administrators that our work is different and less costly, but still important, and that we should therefore be exempt from such mandates? Or do we advocate against such mandates altogether for anyone? Clearly, we must at the very least agitate against the application of research sponsorship as an evaluation criterion for hiring, promoting, and tenuring. I do not pretend to have all the answers, but I believe the questions raised by Osei-Kofi and by my response are worthy of urgent discussion. I also believe that Osei-Kofi's recommendations can form a beginning place for conversation. As she points out, the fact that higher education is dependent on private money is not new. Nor is the fact that this money often come with an agenda. Thus how universities, administrators, and researchers respond to that agenda is the critical issue to consider.

NOTE

1. Personal communication with Dave Biedenbach, Assistant Vice President for University Financial Planning and Budgeting at Iowa State University.

REFERENCE

Bowen, W. (2005). *Equity and excellence in American higher education*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

PART II

NEGOTIATING A NONDIVERSE ACADEMY