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Recommended Citation

Wells, Richard and Ramdeholl, Dianne (2014). "Co-opting Accessibility: A Critical Look at the Discourse of Higher Education Reform," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2014/papers/101>

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Co-opting Accessibility: A Critical Look at the Discourse of Higher Education Reform

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From its beginnings, adult education has been primarily about giving men and women who had been denied by outright discrimination and other structural inequities an opportunity to collectively enrich and empower themselves and their communities by joining a group of scholars and other learners. In other words, adult education has long been linked to struggles around social justice, including the democratization of education itself. Lately, talk of increasing the accessibility of higher education has dropped these broader concerns. Driven in large part by powerful private foundations, we argue that the discourse of reform currently dominating the conversation about the future of higher education is meaningful mainly for the populist cover it provides for a conservative and instrumentalist educational agenda.

Research Questions

1. Do the main assumptions behind higher education reform effort stand up to critical scrutiny?
2. How has this discourse come to represent a common sense approach to increasing accessibility to higher education?
3. How is this discourse defining the purpose of higher education, especially for those who historically and in the present have been denied access to it?

Theoretical Framework

In this study, we have relied on literature on neo-liberalism, especially those writings which have stressed the ongoing commodification of areas of social and cultural development not historically subject to a market based calculus and market based norms. The development of neo-liberalism is not a static, linear process, however. It builds off residual as well as emergent economic, political and ideological practices and formations, incorporates resistance and then inspires it anew. (Harvey, 2005; Foster, 2011; Brenner and Theodore, 2002). As we formulated a critique of the assumptions of this new discourse of higher education reform, we remained grounded in Friere's notion that education in the name of liberation must support students in "becoming proficient readers of both words and worlds" (Friere, 1970).

Methodology

Collaborative Inquiry offered us a systematic yet organic structure for learning from experience, alternating between cycles of action and reflection as emergent ideas, salient themes, and data are explored, identified and analyzed (Kasl & Yorks 2002; Heron & Reason, 2001). Furthermore, we utilized a Gramscian understanding of hegemony, and in particular its elaboration of how specific class interests come to be articulated in the frame of a naturalized common sense. (Gramsci 1971).

Findings

Long a concern of progressives and radicals inspired by Lindeman, Horton, Allman, Freire, and Gramsci, the struggle for access has recently gone mainstream. Nothing better illustrates this than the Obama Administration's push to insure that more Americans than ever before get a college degree. The national economy's competitiveness on global stage depends on it, for one. Moreover, a college degree will be the key to economic mobility, not only because of present and future demand for skilled workers, but because those with college degrees earn consistently more than those without. In "the face of greater and greater global competition, in a knowledge-based economy," Obama told an audience at the University of Buffalo, "a great

education is more important than ever.” (Obama 2013) Proposals for higher education policy put forth by the Obama Administration reflect the pinpointing of out of control tuition costs—not entrenched political and economic inequality—as the main obstacle to wider access to college. To remove this obstacle the President is pushing higher education leaders to introduce efficiencies that will lower costs. They should shorten time to graduation, turn to “competency” based assessments of learning, and go online. The goal, says Obama, is to “make sure that this remains a country where, . . . no matter what you look like and where you come from, what your last name is, here in America you can make it if you try.” (Obama 2013)

The expectation that a college degree will lead to social mobility is understandable, as historical experience and present data appear to back it up. (Folbre 2010, Carnevale, Smith & Strohl 2010) However, there are solid indications that a college education is no guarantee to a decent living in a field of one’s choice. A recent study (Abel, Deitz & Su, 2014) found persistent unemployment amongst recent college graduates, a trend which intensified after the onset of recession in 2009. In 2009-2011, underemployment for college educated 35 year olds was just over 30 per cent; for 22 year olds, over 55 per cent. As another study put it, “having a BA is less about having access to high-paying managerial or technology jobs and more about beating out less educated workers for the Barista or clerical job.” (Beaudry, Green and Sand 2013, p. 3)

The agenda for higher education reform also rests on the claim that jobs in the US go unfilled because there is a “skills gap” among American workers. If there was such a thing, wages and hours would be on the rise due to the high demand for those skills; as it happens, both are stagnant or declining. The fact is that there are simply not enough good paying jobs because of weak aggregate demand and the stinginess of cash rich corporations when it comes to hiring and wages. (Levine 2103, Quesada, Munz & Bruno 2013) “The existence of skill shortages,” says Eisenberry (2014), “exists mostly in the minds of those wanting access to low-wage, indentured servants or public subsidy for the training that firms should be doing themselves.”

With competency based education there is similar ideological subtext. In the US, the idea is rooted in the Cold War era state driven effort to promote the development of the practical/vocational skills deemed necessary in a context of the arms race and global economic competition. (Hodge, 2007) After gaining traction in state sponsored vocational training programs in the UK, practical questions about the design and implementation of competency based programs illustrated the difficulties of a learning process that *begins* with a predetermined set of outcomes. There is also the more philosophical and political matter of the kind of learning being promoted through competency based programs. Surely, a stress on what one knows and what one knows how to do is important. But it also leaves out a lot of what typically goes into an education: exploration; uncertainty; an appreciation of different ways of knowing and doing. As suggested by Edwards and Usher (1994), competency based programs may best be defined as a “means of producing consent without the need for oppression and force in the reproduction of the social order.” Indeed, the deeper issue, argues Field (1991), is not the efficient alignment of skill to market demand, but labor’s “continued subordination, and indeed, the meaning and value of work itself.”

In the US, promoters of competency based programs argue that they will free the system from the credit hour, which has long linked student progress to the amount of time spent in a classroom or a lecture hall. It makes college more efficient and less expensive, in other words, because earning credentials will no longer depend on direct engagement with a faculty member, that “sage on the stage.” (Laitinen 2012; LeBlanc 2013, Soares 2012) Indeed, such a populist tilt is common: the professoriate, presumed to be overpaid, disinterested in teaching, safely

tenured (and sometimes unionized), is an obstacle to the progress competency based assessment represents. Given that most faculty these days are highly insecure adjuncts, this rings hollow. As critics of the trend have suggested, competency based outcomes point to a neo-taylorist strategy to de-skill the academic labor force and align learning outcomes primarily to employer demand rather than intellectual growth, civic engagement, and empowerment. (Foster 2011; Slaton 2013)

The agenda endorsed by Obama also relies on tech infused strategies. But access to computers with broadband, as well as access to the skills to navigate the online world, is not widespread. The US Department of Commerce reported in 2011 that “lower income families, people with less formal education, those with disabilities, Blacks, Hispanics, and rural residents generally lagged the national average in both broadband adoption and computer use.” (US Department of Commerce, 2011) Studies have shown that working class and minority students lag behind their more middle and upper middle class counter parts in completion rates and achievement in an online environment. (Price, Richardson & Jelfs, 2007; Jaggars & Bailey, 2010; Jaggars & Xu, 2013; Kaupp, 2012) Of course, the use of online curriculum can be effective in introducing flexibility while at the same time creating and maintaining high quality engagement amongst students, course material, and instructors. But, as the research shows, it takes time and resources to support faculty and students—something that higher education reformers insist we don’t have—for it to work.

Despite these well-founded concerns, the reform agenda seems to have taken on the character of common sense. Why?

While many private foundations have an interest in education, in the field of higher education two stand out. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has since 2006 poured \$472 million of its estimated \$36 billion into efforts to change higher education in the US. According to a *Chronicle of Higher Education* analysis, \$343 has been spent after Gates announced in 2008 that it would devote its resources to “helping low-income young people earn credentials” through strategies that closely parallel those recently laid out by Obama. (Parry, Field & Supiano 2013) Founded in 2000 when the USA Group, the largest administrator and guarantor of student loans, sold off its assets to Sallie Mae, the Lumina Foundation’s ultimate goal is for sixty per cent of adult age Americans to have college credentials by 2025. Its agenda of lowering costs through technology based productivity enhancements, shortening time to degree, and using big data to track performance, has also by and large been adopted by the Obama Administration. (Parry, Field & Supiano 2013; Katz, 2012)

The point is not merely that deep pocketed philanthropists—“megafoundations” (Katz 2102)—are major players in public policy making. The *hegemony* of institutions like Gates and Lumina—their ability to define the parameters of debate about the future of higher education and thereby delimit the range of policy choice—is rooted in three more specific processes.

1) The foundation money arrived just as states were dramatically cutting allocations for public universities. In response, university administrations then raised tuition, often at disproportional rates. Since the financial crisis of 2008, Arizona has cut per student spending on higher education by 50.4 per cent. Massachusetts cut back by 37.4 per cent, and California, home to the most comprehensive public university system in the country, by 29.3 per cent. New York has sliced into per student investments by 14.7 per cent. When adjusted for inflation, tuition in the Arizona system went up 78.4 per cent between 2008 and 2013. California was close behind, jacking up costs 72 per cent, and New York raised tuition by 17.5 per cent. (Oliff, Palacios, Johnson, & Leachman 2013) While the impact on students comes in the form of the

strain of student loan debt (Norris 2014, Severns 2013), faculty, professionals and staff face cost cutting measures that range from increased teaching loads, more responsibilities for recruitment and outreach, fewer opportunities for professional development. (Dennis 2013; Oliff, Palacios, Johnson, and Leachman 2013; Schuster, J. & Finklestein, M., 2008)

Because of the steady climb in tuition and hence student loan debt—one analysis points out that since 2003 total student debt has risen from \$240 billion to \$1 trillion (Severns 2013)—the public overall is receptive to the idea that the higher education system is in need of a serious rethink and repair. Over the last few decades, university administrations have embraced the idea that the university should be run like a corporation (Steck 2003, Folbre 2010), and have been increasingly dependent on private sector partners for alternative streams of revenue. More and more top administrators come on the job with MBAs rather than PhDs (Ginsburg 2011), which makes it easier for those—like Gates and Lumina—pushing for more efficiency and productivity to find a friendly ear. And when whole programs and departments are facing closure faculty governance bodies and faculty unions have been ill equipped to resist when a university administration seeks out and accepts funds from the private sector. Initiative and momentum in terms supplying the resources have shifted to the private sector, in form the “mega-foundation.”

2) Katz points out that the “classic 20th century foundations had a long-term strategy, hoping to find deep solutions to big problems. . .” (Katz 2012, 2005) The newer foundations, however, are not interested in independent research that might shed light on the issues of the day. The Gates Foundation and others like it have been called “venture philanthropies” engaged in “philanthrocapitalism.” They “adopt a value added approach,” and insist on “quick returns based on business-like criteria.” (Foster 2011, p.18, Ravitch 2010) And unlike the older philanthropies, which treaded lightly when it came to exerting direct influence on policy, philanthrocapital exercises no such caution. As Katz put it, the “new strategic foundations behave as though they are entitled to make public policy, and they are not shy about it.” (2012)

The overall penetration of foundation money across the higher education sector has linked hundreds of institutions and probably thousands of those that work for them to the agendas of the major foundations. In an analysis of the Gates Foundation’s activity, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* provided an interactive graph depicting the capillary influence of the Gates Foundation, the Lumina Foundation, and one other organization active in higher education, the Kresge Foundation (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2013). And while these foundations make grants to universities of all kinds—from Harvard to community colleges—they also fund any and all organizations, profit or non-profit, governmental or NGO, that are involved post-secondary education research and policy making (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2013). As money then filters through these “independent” groups, the big foundations are insulated from criticism that suggests they are too directly involved in grantees activities.

The foundations are by their own admission creating an “echo chamber,” as they all push for more or less the same objectives. (Ruark, 2013a) Between 2006 and 2011, Lumina has handed out \$3.1 million and Gates \$5.4 million in an effort to “keep their goals on the national agenda.” (Ruark, 2013b) As one faculty member at the University of Virginia put it to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the targeted flow of all this money and influence has had a silencing effect. “And so what we're not having in this country is serious scholarly deliberation about these issues, because there's so much money flowing at the punditry about higher education.” (Quoted in Parry, Field & Supiano 2013)

3) In the opening paragraphs of her report “Cracking the Credit Hour,” a go to text for reformers, Amy Laitinen asks us to “Imagine a woman named Juliana.” The first in her family

to attend college, Laitinen's Juliana begins in a local associate degree program because that is what she can afford. She is a bright and able student, but soon the reality of holding down a full-time job, along with the time swallowed up by obligations to family, forces her to drop out. At work she continues to shine, at least until her lack of a bachelor's degree halts her progress. The cheaper public university is too far away. A private college is closer to home, but it is too expensive. Attending there would mean a mountain of debt. (Laitinen 2012, p. 4) This tidy parable, one of hard work and dreams denied at the college gate, is at the center of the discourse of higher education reform. And while it connects with a quite real issue, the prohibitive cost of higher education, it has one other important function: to protect the particular agenda of higher education reform now at the forefront of policy discussions from critical scrutiny. Surely only a hardhearted elitist would be against taking practical steps to reconfigure the business of the university to make a degree accessible for someone like Juliana.

Many see a college education in instrumental terms, although the numbers vary depending on who is doing the polling. A Pew Research poll found that 47% of the public understood the mission of college to be the preparation of students for work, while 39% said college was about personal and intellectual growth. (Pew Research 2011) Another poll, conducted jointly by the Lumina Foundation and Gallup, found that 53% of the public saw college as a means to earn more money, 33% saw it as the way to a good job, and only 3% saw it as way to learn about the world, learn how to think critically, and in the process become a "well-rounded person." (English 2011) One should be careful not to read too much into these numbers. What does seem clear is that the tandem rise in tuition and student loan debt, occurring as median income continues to stagnate, has created uncertainty about the *value* of a college education. In this context, the dominant discourse of reform—with practical solutions to a simple problem of runaway costs—becomes a kind of tonic to a public presented with few other alternatives.

Implications

By opportunistically seizing on a conjuncture determined by the ongoing corporatization of the university system, recession driven cut backs in state funding, rising tuition and student debt, and uncertainty about the value of education, reformers have co-opted the language of access. In their version of "value-added" education, students are construed as so many potential units of human capital and teachers and faculty as middlemen to the students' transformation into consumable forms of labor power. Our own experiences—both online and in the classroom—with students that are caught in the vise of an unforgiving job market and a future burdened by student loan debt offer further evidence of the downside to the shift.

The progressive and radical traditions within adult education serve as a critical counterpoint to the current push for reform. Indeed, the push back comes from those who still believe that education should be a basic human right and one that is geared toward collective transformation. Indeed, one of education's main purposes is to provide opportunities to consider what kind of society we have and what kind of society we want. Looked at this way, the struggle is not just about widening access to a college education. It is about a struggle over its content and its purpose.

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