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The Teleological Effect of Neoliberalism on American Higher Education

[Special Section]

Cover Page Footnote

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The Teleological Effect of Neoliberalism on American Higher Education

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This article explores the impact of a neoliberal political and economic context on American higher education, arguing that the purpose of higher education has been reduced to a transactional process rather than maintaining its transformative potential. Recommendations to mitigate this phenomenon are presented.

Keywords: Community, education, flourishing, neoliberalism, success

American higher education is constantly in motion; as social and cultural demands for education shift and internal influences shuffle priorities, higher education must adjust to meet the expectations and mandates of that which it serves (Lattuca & Stark, 2011). As national economic and political forces identify more with each other and with political and economic powers around the globe, the values of a neoliberal ideology have threatened to undermine the essential, non-monetary goals of higher education. Because of the reductive economic implications of neoliberal policy and discourse, the transactional nature of investing resources toward a diploma is emphasized over the transformational nature of learning toward the end of democratic deliberation and a community-based vision of flourishing and social prosperity. In short, the *telos*, or vision of the good life, of higher education is in danger of being reduced to producing quantifiably successful graduates seeking to flourish in shallow and material terms.

This article seeks to address the teleological effect of neoliberalism as a hegemonic political, philosophical, and social phenomenon in higher education in the United States. By first identifying the different manifestations of neoliberalism; deliberating as to the democratic and humanitarian purposes of education; and, demonstrating how the pervasive neoliberal ideology has colonized higher education's goals and vision of the good life, the author seeks to expose the ways in which neoliberal ideology has misdirected the *telos* of higher education toward a myopic, individual, and ultimately unsustainable vision of human flourishing. Hope is not lost for higher education, as literature suggests that the hegemony of neoliberalism is not without its Achilles' heel. However, the neoliberal agenda has grotesquely altered the ideal *telos* of higher education—that is, developing a holistic social economy that organizes people and resources to meet common needs.

Manifestations of Neoliberalism

In order to fully understand neoliberalism's effect on politics and society, it is important to understand the epistemological underpinnings that make neoliberalism a viable ideology. Neoliberalism finds its ideological roots in classical liberalism, but demonstrates significant differences: the latter creates space within the existing state for a laissez-faire market approach but still holds the government partially responsible for contributing to the general welfare of the state; the former creates a free and unregulated market and models state policy to actively create conditions conducive to an increase in market activity (Hursh, 2007; Klees, 2008; Olssen, 2006). The state commitment to the market gradually overtakes a commitment to social welfare with the logic that welfare and success are realized by economic means, and the cultural understanding of success and flourishing roots itself in an obligation to market ideals. Neoliberalism affirms its dominant position by dominating political, economic, and social discourse and uses otherwise unsuspecting citizens to perpetuate its covert yet hegemonic structure (Ayers, 2005; Kascák & Pupala, 2011). Neoliberalism becomes the lens through which a society sees itself, and establishes roots that spread from a central ideology. These roots grow invasively until they saturate speech and collective understanding, declaring the neoliberal interpretation of reality simply as the way things are (Brancaleone & O'Brien, 2011), and market rationale itself progresses socially to dictate a hierarchy of values that is continually reflected and shaped by the public. So neoliberalism is indeed an ideology, yet, it is best understood by a critical analysis of cultural institutions, norms, and values.

Neoliberalism Manifested in Government

Rather than establishing itself as one way of dealing with reality, neoliberalism has established itself as a metanarrative—that is, a perception of reality that claims universality and insulates itself from critical thinking by an appeal to natural inevitability and desirability (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Walker, 2008). The neoliberal state and its social support use this metanarrative to perpetuate their own power and maintain the status quo. Michel Foucault's (as cited in Kascák & Pupala, 2011) concept of *governmentality* is helpful in identifying the ways in which powerful superstructures organize power and create channels for individuals to envision their power and actions (Davies, Gottsche, & Bansel, 2006; Olssen, 2006). The theory of *governmentality* emphasizes the metanarrative through which state and institutional superstructures manipulate the social order and are able to configure, if not predict, the ways in which individuals and the collective public can and will act (Davies & Bansel, 2007). The new social order, having reconfigured society as a whole to reproduce market behavior, creates a new vision of an Aristotelian good life defined by material accumulation, financial gain, and competitive advantage among other individuals (Davies & Bansel, 2007). This *telos* defines an individualized, material, and visible concept of success—driven in part by insatiable desire and consumption—which is both perpetuated and demonstrated by the state and social institutions.

Using the concept of *governmentality*, one can trace the birth of political neoliberal ideology from its introduction in the mainstream starting in the 1980s, helped

at least in part by the Reagan administration and ushered into prominence by international policy and global institutions (e.g., the World Bank and International Monetary Fund; Ayers, 2005; Davies et al., 2006; Davies & Bansel, 2007; El-Shall, 2014; Henderson & Hursh, 2014; Hursh, 2007; Hursh & Wall, 2011; Kascák & Pupala, 2011; Klees, 2008; Lipman, 2013; Suspitsyna, 2012). A neoliberal government governs economically, defined by free trade, deregulation, competition, and deficit reduction, and cuts social spending while encouraging privatized services to bear the cost of social welfare (Bansel, 2007; Chattopadhyay, 2013; El-Shall, 2014). Society becomes an extension of the economy as the neoliberal state seeks to create a favorable business climate rather than sustaining democracy in social terms (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Henderson & Hursh, 2014), and the cultural goals of neoliberalism create a cultural and moral order that both normalize and reward market-governed, entrepreneurial behavior (Lipman, 2013; Olssen, 2006). As the economy rises as a priority, social welfare legislation and policies fade into costly extensions of a growing and enabling government in a climate that praises individuality and competition as prime conditions for success with a marketplace mentality (Davies & Bansel, 2007). A neoliberal government exists to create conditions for economic success without expressly creating conditions for social flourishing, the perceived differences between the two ultimately lost in state-sponsored market-worship.

Thus, empowered by its status as a metanarrative, and enabled by its ability to maintain power-relationships and the status quo, neoliberalism has ushered in a form of government that is primarily concerned with creating conditions conducive to market activity and assuming that a growing economy will create a thriving society: “public well-being becomes less a civic endeavor and more a function of market activity” (Ayers, 2005, p. 530). Society is reduced to a collection of individuals and freedom is reduced to the ability to choose; individuals are assumed to act with the same rationale, informed by the same cultural perspective, and enjoy the same privileges and advantages regardless of sex, race, class, and other social identities.

Neoliberalism Manifested in Society

The ultimate responsibility given to the individual results in a new moralism; because freedom is defined as the ability to choose between universally sufficient and available options (Bansel, 2007; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Henderson & Hursh, 2014; Hursh & Wall, 2011; Suspitsyna, 2012), a moral individual will make the most rational and responsible decision for their own welfare, and failure to succeed represents at least one bad choice along the way (Bansel, 2007; Davies & Bansel, 2007; El-Shall, 2014; Hursh, 2007). So, the model citizen in the neoliberal state is active, entrepreneurial, rational, responsible, ultimately affluent, and thus morally superior. The new model citizen is reflective of a heightened individuality, concerned with self-preservation and success on the grounds that one’s circumstances are directly related to the decisions they had to make (Davies et al., 2006; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Hursh & Wall, 2011; Kascák & Pupala, 2011).

However, success in the new economized social order is framed in terms of equal choice and opportunity made inherently unequal in the face of lopsided power-

relationships. Although the ultimate individuality follows from neoliberal logic, it neither leaves any room for systemic disadvantage or privilege as a result of social failure. Neoliberalism thrives in part because the cultural majority is either unaware or comfortable with the growing gaps between the privileged and the disadvantaged, a foundational yet profoundly unjust and unsustainable thread in the fabric of the neoliberal metanarrative. Indeed, neoliberal ideology praises competition as the means to success while hiding peripheral populations both physically, in housing markets segregated by class and race, and ideologically through the myth of meritocracy, blaming the individual for their own alleged shortcomings regardless of their preexisting disadvantaged social position. A cycle of stereotypes, bias, and discrimination emerges from the dominant culture's effort to maintain the status quo at the expense of the periphery.

Additional forces outside of the individual's control (e.g., labor market demand) can also be at least partly responsible for an individual's fate (Bansel, 2007; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). This remains true even when the individual equips themselves with sufficient defense against failure; an individual with a proper education and making rational decisions may still be written off as irresponsible if they succumb to misfortune brought about by unseen external circumstances. The individual is seen as the cause and effect of their own success or failure, regardless of any number of external factors that may play a role. Although the individual in many cases is able to exercise power and control over their life choices and opportunities, the neoliberal calculus of success leaves no room to consider external issues that create a unique set of challenges and advantages for each individual.

Neoliberalism Manifested in Higher Education

Finally, as neoliberalism was established on epistemological grounds, adopted through political policy, and embedded in social activity, it has also manifested itself within higher education. In a pre-neoliberal political climate education was seen as a public good, a value to the state by producing a society that could maintain and defend democratic ideals (Davies et al., 2006). The general public was responsible for holding institutions of higher education accountable, and funding came from the government through progressive taxes. However, as the perception of higher education shifted from a public good to a private asset, the field has become increasingly privatized and depends more on private loans and out-of-pocket tuition payments than the substantial government support it once enjoyed (Chickering, 2003; Klees, 2008). Education as a personal commodity redefines schools as centers of production that yield products and services to be traded in the marketplace (Davies & Bansel, 2007): "Higher education is being pushed toward quantification, corporatization, and being defined primarily as a commodity to be purchased" (Hursh & Wall, 2011, p. 566). Thus the social and democratic purposes of education are marginalized in favor of producing graduates that are equipped for a career. Students see education as a ticket for admission into a society that values entrepreneurship, employability, and quantifiable skills and competencies as the ultimate tools for survival and success (Chattopadhyay, 2013; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Hursh & Wall, 2011; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Ryan, Toohey, & Hughes, 1996; Tagg, 2008). This shift in priority signals the commensurate loss of a student's ability to

envision success as an interdependent, rooted, and connected ideal of social, environmental, and personal flourishing.

Knowledge itself, and its relation to higher education, has been colonized by neoliberal discourse within the neoliberal narrative. The role of the university is relegated to that of an enterprise, selling knowledge as a commodity that is exchanged in the labor market (Hursh & Wall, 2011). This creates a market of education that is driven by accountability and competition, framing the student as a consumer choosing which school will offer them the best return on their investment of time and money (Henderson & Hursh, 2014; Lipman, 2013; Suspitsyna, 2012). The knowledge purveyed by the entrepreneurial university is redefined from an examined life resulting from a transformative process, to a matter of efficiency in acquiring skills and information as quickly as possible in pursuit of a credential demanded by employers in the labor market (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Olssen, 2006). Students enter higher education as a means to an end, working for a credential that will assist them in searching for a job, and acquiring competencies for a life as a rational, competitive, and competent individual in a society made up of individual entrepreneurs (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Olssen, 2006).

Suspitsyna (2012) provides an insight into how neoliberalism has manifested itself in higher education by analyzing discourse used by the U. S. Department of Education in reference to higher education. Most references to higher education are economic, and social good is framed either as an economic goal or as a secondary purpose of education. The state's commitment to education is seen as a commitment to class mobility and economic success rather than social welfare and social justice, and contributes to the new moralism of the competitive individual. Similarly, in a critical discourse analysis of community college mission statements, Ayers (2005) finds that a commitment to preparing students for the workforce defines the vision of many community colleges. By focusing on the needs of the market, community colleges have prioritized economic growth and producing human capital over the social, moral, and individual growth that historically characterized community colleges' *raison d'être* and commitment to higher education for all.

So the reduction of public support for higher education as a public good, resulting in higher out-of-pocket and loan-based payment, has contributed to the economization of education. Further, the need for colleges to demonstrate the best result for the lowest price has developed a market of education, reducing a transformational process to a commoditized set of learning outcomes and career promises. The U. S. Department of Education's rhetoric and the mission statements of many community colleges, both saturated by market vocabulary and demonstrating a quasi-religious commitment to economic success, are also critical in shaping and affirming how the government and the general public perceive the *telos* of higher education.

The *Telos* of Higher Education

For the purpose of this article, teleology will be defined as the direction, goal, and purpose of any given concept or community to achieve what the community holds as *the good life*. The means of achieving a communal *telos* can shift over a period of time; for example, the *telos* of the American government may have always been to contribute

to American flourishing (thus being shaped by what the country defines as *good*), but the ways in which that good was realized has changed significantly since the 18th century. The neoliberal American state is the latest shift in how flourishing (or, the American dream) is to be achieved, a *telos* defined by individual empowerment and wealth accumulation in a free and deregulated market, thus living the good life. The neoliberal interpretation is hegemonic in nature, aligning other social and cultural discourses and institutions with its definition of flourishing and the means to achieve it. Thus, the *telos* of higher education has been colonized by a neoliberal ideology and the teleological implications that follow, shifting the ultimate direction of higher education from its social, communal, and democratic ideals toward a vision of success rooted in individual achievement and determined by material gains.

Scholars are concerned about higher education's place in society. Although colleges and universities have ideally prepared citizens to maintain and defend democracy, colleges and universities now seem more preoccupied with bolstering the economy and preparing a workforce (Suspitsyna, 2012). This runs directly contrary to the purpose of education as defined by John Grier Hibben (1912), President of Princeton University, in his inaugural address when he claimed that education should conserve the "intellectual, moral, and spiritual power in our nation" and "deliver free spirits from the bondage of material impulse" (p. 848). This teleological proclamation thus identifies intangible, democratic values as the goal of higher education, values that contribute to civil discourse. American farmer, writer, artist and critic Wendell Berry redefined this civic economy "[n]ot as economics but... the making of the human household upon the earth" (as cited in Henderson & Hursh, 2014, p. 168). Indeed, Henderson and Hursh (2014) argued that the *telos* of education should be rooted in the Greek understanding of *oikonomia*, "the process and goal of engaging in dialogue in how to build economic, social, and ecological systems in which humans, other living beings, and the land community flourish" (p. 169). This holistic vision of flourishing accounts for more than accumulation of wealth and is responsible for more than the individual—it requires of education a diverse progression of curricular and extracurricular activities to best prepare students for human life rooted in culture and place (Chattopadhyay, 2013; Henderson & Hursh, 2014; Hibben, 1912). Although higher education may have never actualized these ideals in the past, it has become harder to articulate the ideal *telos* of higher education in a linguistic and cultural framework that leaves little room for unquantifiable benefits.

The centrality of community is essential to the *telos* of higher education. The rampant individualism promoted by neoliberalism separates a person from their culture, which erodes the collective cultural memory and marginalizes important facets to sustainable human flourishing—ecological responsibility, social relationships, communal dependency, and democratic deliberation (Henderson & Hursh, 2014). The process of learning, and the knowledge, wisdom, and experience that result, is best directed toward communal prosperity, revealing the non-monetary goals and holistic understanding of what is essential for human flourishing (Olssen, 2006; Walker, 2008). This communal understanding of thriving should not be mistaken for a lesser form of liberty or an infringement of personal freedom as understood from a neoliberal perspective. Freedom cannot sustain itself solely through the individual, but only by rooting the individual within a culture and membership in a community (Henderson & Hursh, 2014). Thus, the

telos of education cannot be limited to performing a task, accumulating competencies or credential, or acquiring attributes on an individual basis (Chickering, 2003; Walker, 2008). In order to truly live a good life, students must define their goals in terms of their ability to prosper within a community and experience education as a transformative process that shapes them into social, democratic, and communal agents.

The Teleological Effect of Neoliberalism on Higher Education

The competitive, individualized, consumption-driven *telos* of neoliberalism is fundamentally at odds with what should be the communal, cultural, democratic *telos* of higher education. Because of the hegemonic nature and uncontested neoliberal metanarrative, the *telos* of higher education is at risk. At the very least, neoliberal imperatives seep into the conceptual *telos* of higher education, slowly infecting the community-based vision of flourishing with an individualized vision of wealth. This colonization follows different routes, but is prevalent through increased surveillance, undermining the importance of community, and redefining social justice issues, thus profoundly altering the *telos* of higher education.

Surveillance: Managerialism and Accountability

One way in which neoliberalism has affected the *telos* of higher education is through increased accountability. Accountability is not inherently harmful, as the quality of higher education must be measured against a normative (yet responsive) standard of excellence. Student assessments of faculty, courses, and student life can be valuable in making higher education better and more responsive to the increasingly diverse needs of college students (Chattopadhyay, 2013; Gerard, 1957; Hursh & Wall, 2011; Tagg, 2008). However, curriculum suffers under excessive accountability if content is objectified so that it can be quantified and assessed, leading to an educational production model. This creates consumable education, which characterizes the nature of schools as industrial producers of knowledge and the nature of students as consumers, subjecting both to expectations of efficiency and accountability from external parties (Klees, 2008). Standardized tests and learning outcomes are examples of this artificial quantification of learning. Both measure the quantifiable aspects of learning over the qualitative value that distinguishes transformative education, and the quantified data is then compared and consumed in an educational marketplace (Brancaleone & O'Brien, 2011; Klees, 2008). Learning outcomes and standardized tests claim to represent the results of learning processes and provide an (alleged) objective assessment of what a student knows. This is despite the impossibility of capturing the *product* of an inherently un-quantifiable education or the *result* of an undefined and uncalculated learning process, especially outside of meaningful practice and application (Brancaleone & O'Brien, 2011).

The modern reliance on the outside expert is another hallmark of the neoliberal managerialism imposed on higher education. For example, nationalized assessment programs for K-12 schools provide standards for schools and ideally set goals for equitable education across the country, but at the same time strip local communities that are directly affected by the schools of their democratic power to decide how to improve

their schooling (Henderson & Hursh, 2014; Lipman, 2013). By using austerity measures and accountability solutions as a Trojan horse into school governance, outside expert forces undermine localized democratic processes in the name of rectifying educational maladies, ironically prohibiting community participation from arriving at a solution, a principle goal of the very education they seek to shape (Henderson & Hursh, 2014; Lipman, 2013). Truly effective accountability must be shared between local and national authorities to make sure that local needs are met and voices are heard but also ensuring a consistent standard; thus the outside expert has a role to play in educational accountability, but not at the expense of participatory democratic practices (Hursh, 2007; Hursh & Wall, 2011; Prakash, 1994). Consequently, the *telos* of higher education is affected by neoliberal managerial accountability in that knowledge is quantified and the local is marginalized in favor of national, severely limiting a student's ability to experience learning as a transformative process and to envision true freedom as flourishing in community.

Undermining the Community

Although outside experts and national agendas have the ability to silence local voices, the neoliberal emphasis on competition and the autonomous individual also severely undermines any concept of codependency and rootedness in a specific community. Since the public good is limited to national defense and a production economy, education – its *telos* hijacked by a vision of human capital in a knowledge economy – becomes less about democratic participation and leadership and more about production and consumption (Ayers, 2005; Kascák & Pupala, 2011). The role of the student as a consumer in an educational market, taught that true flourishing is achieved by individual consumption (if not explicitly taught in the curriculum, implicitly demonstrated by epistemological structures built into college culture), fundamentally limits the ability of students to engage socially and develop a sense of social and civic responsibility (Chattopadhyay, 2013; Chickering, 2003; Hursh & Wall, 2011). The market emphasis on creating the best return on the investment of one's education thus prioritizes individual skills and competencies, leaving little room for qualities and values that contribute to the public sphere. These qualities and values, referred to by Klees (2008) as *externalities*, ultimately lead to quantifiably inefficient social choices; inefficient because they are non-monetary and are voluntary commitments outside of the realm of state or economy, but absolutely vital to the sustenance and growth of a healthy democracy (Flyvbjerg, 1998). Thus an implicit neoliberal ideological agenda has misplaced the value and essentiality of community in favor of a *telos* of individual flourishing, tied to consumption, the new moralism of market rationality, and the responsible, autonomous individual entrepreneur.

Redefining Social Justice

A redefinition of social justice goes hand-in-hand with the marginalization of sustaining community. As a consequence of dominant market logic and inherently transactional interactions, individuals participate in a structural web of power

relationships. Each transactional relationship hosts layers of power dynamics first between the buyer and the seller (Brancaleone & O'Brien, 2011; Davies et al., 2006), the means of production and the laborer, and ultimately the global core and periphery. Although the immediate individual power relationships are unpredictable and dynamic, patterns and trends inevitably emerge that create power structures and hierarchies among individuals, resulting in inequity and power deficiencies that must be corrected by increased coercion to preserve the status quo (Lipman, 2013). Marginalized groups are pushed further to the periphery in the name of progress and production, manifested in practices spanning from exploitative wages to urban renewal. Further, by elevating individual sovereignty, neoliberal ideology assumes that agents act on a level playing field, and since the individual can rely on market rationality to make responsible decisions, success or failure are reflective of individual actions (Hursh & Wall, 2011).

This perception cannot consider systemic disadvantage and prejudice, which leads to glaring social inequities and economic, social, and civil disparities between people-groups. Rather than identifying these disparities as social problems, however, neoliberalism redefines them as economic problems that can be solved with market solutions. Since success and flourishing can be envisioned as participating in a consumer economy, neoliberal solutions address issues by preparing disadvantaged populations with labor credential and tools for future economic success. This approach neglects the root causes of the disadvantage (which are inherently outside of the sphere of the economy; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006), and absolves higher education from the responsibility of preparing students to create meaningful social solutions to deep-seated social problems (Suspitsyna, 2012).

Additionally, it is a disservice to simply provide disadvantaged groups with labor credentials, and an affront to the ideal *telos* of higher education. Aside from neglecting the social causes of inequities, the structures of higher education created to widen social capability are inherently unequal; widening participation in higher education as an economic solution to the problem of social inequities has led to a stratification of schools that draw different students from different social strata, that teach different skills, and that graduate students with disparate social capital and labor potential. Rather than solving social issues, this serves to perpetuate both the neoliberal ideology of consumption and class stratification (Walker, 2008). Even among students in the upper stratum of colleges and universities, relying on skills and credentials alone for flourishing neglects the social construction of such skills; different skills and attributes are valued differently among different people (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). For example, a confident and decisive personality may be a valuable trait for a White male, but may be perceived as threatening or undesirable for a Black male or female of any race.

For-profit universities offer an example of the stratification of both schools and society. These universities advertise themselves as affordable and convenient ways for busy people to earn a degree and, consequently, a better life. Additionally, for-profit colleges attract non-traditional students, such as first-generation students, low-income students, and underrepresented minority students (Clark, 2011; Howard-Vital, 2006), all groups of underserved students for whom the widening of educational opportunities would be seen as a major benefit. However, for-profit and many online universities only require courses necessary for a single major and do not offer students exposure to other

majors, much less experiences that are not directly tied to earning credit or career preparation. This narrow vision of education may be successful in reaching its goal of career preparation, but may also leave students unprepared for long-term stability as career interests and the labor market shift and perpetuating the neoliberal ideal of self-preservation through economic success. Further, promises of affordability and convenience disguise low graduation rates, inflated student loan-debt, and jobs that never materialize for students, leaving them further behind (Clark, 2011). Buying in to education contributes to social stratification while offering conditional hope to marginalized people and shallow solutions to deep-seated social problems.

In sum, neoliberalism affects the *telos* of higher education by redefining the very meaning of higher education. Neoliberalism dislocates education by commodifying its intrinsic value and emphasizing directly transferable skills and competencies (Brancaleone & O'Brien, 2011); non-monetary values are marginalized, and with them the non-monetary moralism (i.e., the idea of unpaid civic duty and delayed gratification) that is essential in sustaining a healthy democratic society (Henderson & Hursh, 2014; Norby et al., 1986; Suspitsyna, 2012). Thus, the result of a good education is determined by the ability to master a trade or stay happily employed, redefining the idea of community as an impersonal labor force from which personal gain can be derived (Brancaleone & O'Brien, 2011; Davies & Bansel, 2007). The importance of community and acknowledgment of social disparities wane as the responsible and competitive individual waxes as the civic ideal. Education is effectively reconfigured as business training to prepare the self as entrepreneur, society is reimagined as the labor market, and the importance of rooting oneself in a deliberative, just, and equitable community is lost in the face of rooting oneself in competitive advantage.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the *Telos* of Higher Education

It is clear that the neoliberal metanarrative significantly obscures the *telos* of United States higher education. What should be a transformative experience that prepares students to contribute to a thriving society and economy has been reduced to a transaction in which students offer time and tuition for a diploma that serves as a personal asset and entry fee for a consumer society. The autonomy of the individual in competition with other individuals emerges as the civic ideal while commitments to community, culture, and deliberative democracy are marginalized. Higher education has become fully capable of graduating students that not only buy into this narrative, but remain more focused on pursuing their individual consumptive advantage than thinking critically about the unsustainable, uprooted, and inequitable culture in which they compete. The economic *telos* of higher education has eclipsed the social *telos*.

Although the situation seems dire, higher education is still in a position to rebalance itself. Despite the power of the neoliberal metanarrative, its hegemony is threatened by critical thinkers and the ability to consider alternative understandings of flourishing. Individuals working alone and together are well-positioned to make transformative changes in the way that college campuses and communities perceive the benefits of education. Therefore, colleges and universities must nurture more and better imaginative and creative students and faculty. Higher education needs more thinkers and

leaders that encourage the sowing of seeds in critical thinking in order to harvest truly effective visions of flourishing that will define the ethos of the university as an institution that benefits all facets of the democratic society and redirect the *telos* of education toward maintaining and defending civil society. In order to accomplish this, colleges and universities must critically examine the way by which they see themselves as their own community and as they relate to society at large. What kind of an impact does the institution make in its community? How does it measure its students' success? How do students measure their own success? What campus programming—academic and extracurricular—exists to challenge the neoliberal gospel of consumption and competitive individuality, and how does the school foster critical conversation and action?

Service-learning is one example of a tool that schools can use to challenge students' perspectives on themselves as an individual and on the society in which they live. Service-learning not only improves students' ability to think critically but also increases awareness of community needs, contextualizing and adding value to academic coursework (Sedlak, Doheny, Panthofer, & Anaya, 2003; Simons & Cleary, 2006; Sullivan-Catlin, 2002). Community-based organizations serve a variety of needs, interact with a variety of people, and serve as examples of how maximizing freedom need not be limited to an individual context. Although these experiences benefit the individual student in multiple forms, they are rooted in their local communities and enable students to envision a picture of flourishing that extends to those around them as well.

Service-learning also uniquely provides students with diversity education opportunities in which students explore their social identities in relation to those around them, both in the classroom and in the community. Effective service-learning engages students with people that are different than themselves in an unfamiliar environment, and facilitates reflection throughout the program. These experiences can help students better grasp the gravity of current social inequities and help them appreciate the need for social justice (Lechuga, Clerc, & Howell, 2009), illustrating the inequity of the alleged level playing field on which individuals compete. Pairing course lectures and readings with critical reflection in partnership with diverse, out-of-classroom experiences provides a holistic context in which service-learning can be processed; students are able to study academic sources in the classroom and supplement that objective learning with a subjective, relationship-based experience. The students are able to reconcile the ways that they previously perceived or experienced their communities and visions of success by processing intellectual theory, supported by experiential observation, with space for critical reflection under the guidance and support of faculty and classmates (Rice & Horn, 2014). This structured, multi-faceted approach to diversity education leads to greater awareness of social issues and uneven starting points that are conducive to transformative and sustained social action, as well as a new understanding of how individual success can affect communal flourishing positively or negatively (Lechuga et al., 2009).

Thus, service-learning elevates civic responsibility as core a virtue of education within an active learning community (Philipsen, 2003), in contrast to solely equipping the individual with a competitive advantage. This kind of education envisions social justice and communal prosperity as an ultimate goal by preparing students to value diversity and work for social and economic equity in their communities (Boyle-Baise & Langford,

2004). Students are able to connect themselves with the societal structures that surround them (rather than isolating themselves as an individual fighting for self-preservation), and are more likely to tether their success to the flourishing of the community around them (Rice & Horn, 2014). The informed interactions between students and community partners can create a relationship that yields a greater understanding of social theory and structure, and supports each individual as playing a role in seeking social justice. By effectively utilizing service-learning, students will be better prepared to take an active stance for social justice in their education, their work, and their communities, while critically examining their vision of the good life as it concerns others around them. However, service-learning is but one facet of an education that spans cognitive and affective dimensions. Intentional community engagement may make a powerful impact with individual students or even sections of entire courses, but service-learning and similar practices are one small first step toward a larger goal of institutional and cultural change.

Neoliberalism is a powerful philosophical, social, cultural, and political force in the United States. Its influence shapes how individuals think about themselves and their place in society, configures cultural norms and values, and has affected the ultimate purpose and goal of higher education. Higher education must be critically counter-cultural in its struggle to maintain itself as a force that sustains flourishing in a democratic society. This *telos* of higher education must be informed by both national and local need, and citizen-students must share the vision of flourishing that roots individuals in a contextualizing culture and community. Higher education must return to its purpose of a holistic experience in which students find themselves and their vocation in service to civic goals that maintain and defend democracy in its truest sense—liberty and justice for all.

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