

# Wake Up or Perish: Neo-Liberalism, the Social Sciences, and Salvaging the Public University

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## Abstract

Higher education around the world is currently undergoing a neo-liberal administrative takeover. The drive to reduce costs and increased bureaucratization do not serve any other purpose than increasing the power of the universities' administration. The reasons for allowing this situation to happen are related to scholars' inertia and subscribing to a belief that academia can and should be impractical. As a result, the emerging corporate university, McDonaldized model relies increasingly on contingent and deskilled faculty, effectively eliminating the traditional academic freedoms. We conclude with suggestions for possible courses of action to make a constructive counter-movement to the radical changes taking place. We propose that we can begin addressing the predicaments of higher education through re-discovering our role in the society, by re-conceptualizing the disciplinary boundaries of academic fields, by forcing the de-bunkerization of academic career and work, and by starting up multi-disciplinary learning communities at universities. We argue that collective action is needed immediately, if any positive change is possible at all before more of higher education is more deeply degraded.

## Introduction

Many observers agree public universities are in serious trouble—some have even stated that by 2008, “it had become hard to see higher education in terms other than crisis, and harder to capture its situation in other than crisis terms” (Newfield, 2008, p. 19). In Europe and the United States, public higher education in general, and business schools in particular, are undergoing fundamental, if not revolutionary, transformations including massive expansion of non-academic administrative structures, growing salary differentials between administrators and faculty, the occasionalization of the faculty, sub-contracting many campus services, and re-conceptualization of students and private sector actors as customers rather than as learners or beneficiaries of education and research (Chomsky, Lewontin, & Montgomery, 1997; Folbre, 2010; Fuller, 2002; Ginsberg, 2011).

The introduction of pseudo-free-market competition in the United Kingdom, already called a “grim threat” to universities there (Head, 2010), Danish higher education cost reduction reform and “steering” of “self-owning” institutions (Wright & Williams-Ørberg, 2008) that resulted in a plan to burn several hundred thousand books at University of Copenhagen to be replaced by a “knowledge center” (Young, 2011), the Bologna Process reforms imposed on public universities that lack the resources to implement them, many American states cutting professorial retirement and health benefits while curtailing union bargaining rights,

the massive occasionalization of faculty appointments, and constant tuition increases together reveal a higher education system in crisis. In a globalized educational market, institutions are forced to conform to international rankings, accreditation systems, as well as to researcher and student mobility. Higher education institutions outside Europe and the United States face the similar predicaments and fight similar battles (Marginson & Considine, 2000; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997), and business schools are in the avant-garde of this transformation.

These institutions did need to be reformed. The hierarchical, authoritarian, discipline-bound Tayloristic universities of the 20th century had many dysfunctional elements and needed major organizational reforms. They needed to focus on setting more socially meaningful research agendas, and teaching courses with current and relevant content to students who will work in a global system filled with large-scale system problems. However, the need for reform has been used to justify the wholesale subjection of higher education to neo-liberal pseudo-market dream work of the sort that arises every 50 years or so, lays waste to the gains

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of the welfare state, provokes social and economic crises, and then is once again discredited. Each time more resources are wasted, generations of people see their lives ruined, and the consolidation of world wealth and power in the hands of the few is increased.

One way lens for understanding the reforms is to analyze the cultural production of actors in these neo-liberal schemes. The neo-liberal system converts students, faculty, administrators, and policy makers into specific kinds of social actors: meritocratic strivers who seek to climb the ladder of success higher and faster than their direct competitors. These neo-liberal persons together interact to produce a university system in which all are instrumental strivers constrained to follow tracks laid out for them. This is the death of higher education, not a reform of a system.

Many, if not all, reforms are neither approved nor welcomed by most faculty and students. Administrators strip public institutions of resources purchased with public funds and reallocate these public goods to their private sector political supporters, their own salaries and projects, and thereby participate actively in the consolidation of the control of elites of key institutions in society (Ehrenberg, 2007). The non-academic decision makers have gained unparalleled control of the academy by bringing universities into line with the rest of the neo-liberal vision of the “new public management” (Ginsberg, 2011). This is true in particular of business schools, which are increasingly externally controlled (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978/2003) by accreditation bodies. These bodies are run by the deans, who, through externalization of standards can increase their hold over faculty members who were previously influential in the schools’ decisions. Business schools in particular, and universities in general are now driven mainly by what administrators and governing boards understand to be “profit.” They reduce the budgets for research and expand short-term revenue-generating programs, such as MBAs (Winant, 2012), in spite of their diminishing value for the students (Korn, 2011) and the fact that “the return on investment on an MBA has gone the way of Greek public debt” (Broughton, 2011). They exploit the results of prior generations of research but do not support its ongoing development.

Students and faculty members are not passive subjects of this. Long ago faculty, despite occasional shows of disciplinary solidarity, became radical individualist strivers, competing for grants, publications, promotions, salary increases, better jobs elsewhere according to a set of rules as market driven as anything dreamed up by administrators. Students start competing in middle school to develop resumes and transcripts to qualify for the best colleges and universities. Once in, they compete with each other for grades, entry into popular organizations, for entry into the most popular and potentially lucrative majors, for interviews with employers, for the best jobs, and then on up the ladder in the organizations that hire them. Faculty

and students have become adept strivers and consumers of market incentives and prizes and are less and less “academics” in the sense of strivers for knowledge, humane broadening of perspectives, new experiences, and new ways of viewing the world (McMahon, 2009). They are consumers first and producers second (Kirp, 2004; Kolodny, 1998).

The professoriate is not a partner in these higher education reforms. As a group, professors have been unable and/or unwilling to create a meaningful counter-movement to these trends. Partly this is because faculty fail to understand the consequences of their behavior is a future of servitude in a “perma-temp” job market for many of them and for nearly all of their students (Berry, 2005; Frank & Gabler, 2006). Current faculty have shown remarkable unwillingness to change research agendas and behavior to overcome our own irrelevance to what is happening to our institutions (Burgan, 2006), and so an increasing number of the faculty are fee-for-service employees, no matter what they think of themselves. Most U.S. colleges and universities, just as the stand-alone business schools, now not only refuse to hire their presidents from among the faculty, but insist on the use of professional executive search services to find these leaders, assuring the governing boards of independence from the faculty’s influence and reinforcing the administration’s unilateral control of the institutions (Ginsberg, 2011; Gould, 2003; W. Shumar, 1997).

Our purpose in laying this out is to propose what we faculty members, and especially organization studies scholars, might do to address these issues, even though it is now very late in the day. The first step in this is to examine the big picture of academia and organizational changes it is undergoing as a prologue to change strategies. In particular, we are going to focus on the neo-liberal administrative takeover of university management, and the advancing bureaucratization of schools. We are going to show how a successful ideological campaign has been made, persuading society that academic work is not practical and empowering the administrators to treat academics as loony rabble to be “managed.” Then we are going to describe four areas where academics can stand up and resist the oppressive changes: through rediscovering our role in the society, by re-conceptualizing the disciplinary boundaries of academic fields, by forcing the de-bunkerization of academic career and work, and by starting up multi-disciplinary learning communities at universities. We conclude by recognizing that these changes are highly unlikely to happen, due to overall inertia of tenured faculty.

We rely on the published accounts and critiques of the recent changes in academic world, as well as on our own experience in going through the tenure track system at research universities, respectively, in the United States and in Poland. We rely on these experiences and examples from European and American university models because it is what we know and because the rest of the world is aspiring

to and unfortunately following these examples. Even though our observations are relevant for most disciplines, we particularly want to address management and organizational scholars, who, at least in principle, should be competent in analyzing organizational problems and facilitating organizational changes in a more positive direction.

## The Big Picture

We show that the political economy and the cultural systems of higher education must now change radically away from old-fashioned Taylorism and also away from the latest incarnation of free-market fanaticism. University faculty members must study and teach in relationship to the complex, dynamic, multi-dimensional problems that affect global society now (Altbach, Gumport, & Berdahl, 2011; C. Shumar, 2008). Examples of such problems are global warming, global inequality, the arms race, religious intolerance and fundamentalism, and so on. These are large-scale, dynamic systems problems. While none of these crucial problems is a disciplinary problem, part of the solutions depend on an ability to combine the knowledge and experiences of many academic specialists. Unlocking the value and impact of that specialized knowledge is an organizational challenge at which contemporary universities have failed. The exception is military hardware and software successfully managed through complex combinations of disciplinary expertise and collaboration with external authorities and organizations (Arum & Roksa, 2010; Brint, 2002).

This is not just about the faculty being reorganized to be effective because faculty behavior, the kinds of curricula offered, and the sorts of teaching done have a significant impact on students. Students, on graduation, will be expected to work in a world in which there are no disciplinary boundaries, to function independently, competently, to be able to learn new things in a variety of areas and to exercise good judgment in the company of others with different and possibly competing views. They are currently trained in academic majors and specialties largely using outmoded teaching methods and course materials that often reflect the past century and the interests of disciplines within the university (Marc Bousquet, 2008; Wolfe, Hersh, & Merrow, 2005).

The perception of university as a hybrid organization, combining academic and professional goals with the public service ones is in decline (Koppell, 2003). The dominant neo-liberal narratives now have it that contemporary universities need to be cost-aware and run like “businesses” (Cavanaugh, 2009; Ross, 2009). Though we will not demonstrate it here, we can affirm based on years of experience working with private sector organizations that contemporary universities are anything but business-like, and while they should make good fiscal decisions, they cannot be run as for-profit businesses. As Stefan Collini notes (2012),

One thing that needs saying in the face of this self-deluded and self-important twaddle is that in several important ways universities are now less efficient than they were twenty years ago before the commercial analogy started to be applied in earnest. After all, two of the most important sources of efficiency in intellectual activity are voluntary cooperation and individual autonomy. But these are precisely the kinds of things for which a bureaucratic system leaves little room. (p. 123)

This matters because the failure of the faculty and the public to understand the falsity of this claim to be business-like is a core cause of the problem of contemporary higher education. What matters most here is the neo-liberal assertion that only “free-market” forces, *as interpreted by administrators and policy makers*, can cure higher education of its ills and save us all from waste and liberal pipe dreams. They know best, they can read the tea leaves and it is for the faculty and students to suck it up and obey.

“Administrators and a new breed of university ‘managers’ find ways of rationalizing processes within the ‘system’ in the search of optimal and standardized output” (Case & Selvester, 2002, p. 240). Higher education is “marketized” without any recognition of its specificity and differentiation (Czarniawska & Genell, 2002). And as universities become more identified with commercial wealth, they also lose their uniqueness in society. “They are no longer viewed as ivory towers of intellectual pursuits and truthful thoughts, but rather as enterprises driven by arrogant individuals out to capture as much money and influence as possible” (Sharp, 1994, p. 148).

When we look at the information systems, the management structures, and the decision models in use at most universities, we see that universities look nothing like 21st-century knowledge industries with their flat hierarchies, distributed decision making, and leadership from below. Universities are antique Tayloristic factories—hierarchical, massively over-staffed administratively, and poorly coordinated. Administrators cannot define or even effectively measure their outputs and they do not do the research necessary to find out the impacts of what they teach on the lives/careers of their graduates. Rather they do as they please and call it “business-like” (Noble, 1998; W. Shumar, 1997).

Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) convincingly showed how supposedly free-market ideology is efficiently enforced, while the people who could oppose it (and who, most likely, are the ones to lose most because of it) are struggling to cope with the results of the crisis these very reforms create. It might be tempting to portray the academic world as an innocent victim of “shock therapy” but we do not.

## Neo-Liberal Administration

Deans and presidents/rectors/chancellors are quite eager to deploy pseudo-economic frameworks and to use methods

and approaches once used in the business world, even if many of these supposed methods have proved themselves obsolete and counter-productive. They do so because it reinforces administrative power and hegemony over the institutions. The most popular academic administrative ideas actually help sustain the most rigid and hierarchical features of higher education institutions (Birnbaum, 2000). They are not reforms but administrative and policy-maker power concentrations enforced within the structure of an old-fashioned Tayloristic organization (Ginsberg, 2011).

At many institutions, the drive to reduce expenses focuses on reducing the number and costs of the primary value producers, the faculty (Ehrenberg, 2007). Universities rely more and more on non-tenured, short-term faculty. Currently in the United States, these now make up more than three fourths of all faculty, as compared with two thirds in 1995 (T. Lewin, 2011b). In the United Kingdom, between 1993 and 2003, the percentage of term-contract faculty rose from 50% to 58.3% (Head, 2010). Then, after hiring new term-contract instructors instead of replacing retiring tenured faculty, universities admit bigger and bigger cohorts of PhD candidates and postdocs as cheap labor fomenting their unrealistic hopes of eventually taking their place as tenured faculty in the future (M. Bousquet, 2002). The growth of the number of doctoral students is so enormous that universities are “PhD factories” (Cyranoski, Gilbert, Ledford, Nayar, & Yahia, 2011). The practice of exploitation of doctoral students and postdocs has developed to the point that some compare PhD studies with Ponzi schemes, and view PhD candidates as indentured labor (“The Disposable Academic,” 2010). Many universities also gladly send their regular students on unpaid internships, recognizing that giving teaching credit for these is free, compared with offering properly supervised practical educational experiences. A few institutions even require students to pay for such internships (Perun, 2011). All the while, students are drowning in debt (Ehrenberg, 2007). In 2010, American student-loan debt actually surpassed credit-card debt for the first time in history (T. Lewin, 2011a).

As academics working in organization studies, we note the most obvious change that has taken place: The managers of universities over the last 20 years have reduced the role of faculty members to that of fee-for-service employees. Using Henry Mintzberg’s (1993) popular model, we see that middle-line administration (deans) increased their control and power over the professionals (faculty). The managerialist ethos of university administrators now limits the professional and individual autonomy of faculty (McAleer & McHugh, 1994) and backs up this limitation by replacing faculty with powerless external instructors or temporary workers whenever possible. These same administrators also work their relationships with governmental and private sector actors to monopolize the lines of communication and exclude the faculty from these interactions.

All the while, most of these administrators are on their own career tracks, floating through institutions as they climb the meritocratic ladder toward a position of university leadership somewhere (Tuchman, 2009).

Scores of stories about this process exist but one will do. A professor from Bournemouth University who refused to pass students not meeting basic minimal standards of knowledge in his topic, was overruled by the administration and dismissed from the school (Henry, 2010). The disciplinary, guild-like internally protective and hierarchical behavior of the academic disciplines made academics easy marks for neo-liberal academic competitions of the sort the administrators now manage without academic input. The faculty compete with each other and guard their disciplinary boundaries against other faculty, making them ideal subjects for administrative manipulation because each department is so easy to play off against the others.

Academic freedom, which in the Humboldtian sense was understood as freedom to choose research topics and interests (Readings, 1996), has been reduced to an increasingly limited freedom of speech (Dworkin, 1996), partly translated into the freedom to engage in academic “free-market competition” among scholars. It now faces even greater limitations through administrative control of campus speech codes and publications. Research evaluations are monopolized by administrators: journal and university rankings, citation indexes, and strict quantitative measures of scholarly work are used to discipline the faculty workers. This phantasmagorical accounting make little substantive sense as meaningful evaluations of academic impact and importance (Adler & Harzing, 2009; Özbilgin, 2009; Wedlin, 2011), but they are excellent tools for controlling, rewarding, and punishing faculty members. They also destroy what university work is all about: cooperative, friendly, and non-competitive research (Collini, 2012). Thus, the faculty are being deskilled and demoted to the status of unorganized wage workers rather than partners in university life (Braverman, 1974). The freedom to choose research interests and to be intellectually detached is transformed into a freedom to pursue academic career by following a one-and-only correct path, set by the administration (Parker & Weik, 2013).

While students’ role in this scheme is key, students are increasingly told and pressed to behave as customers of the university and universities attempt to replicate what they perceive as corporate practices (Gould, 2003). Students are culturally constructed as meritocratically motivated individuals who already know what they want and need and simply have to make wise consumer choices. Gone is the model of a student as a learner, as an apprentice, with only partly formed tastes who is exploring the university in search of an education that will provide satisfactory paths to the future.

This view of students as customers is utter nonsense. They neither have well-formed preferences nor anything

like the kind of knowledge required to make wise course, major and career selections. Certainly they know something about their interests and talents but not enough to configure an academic plan alone. The purpose of a university education is, in part, to help them find their way to this kind of knowledge and focus. The value of real university education, including a business one, goes far beyond the functional and merely professional training (Clarke & Butcher, 2009). Still, students now are given a menu of courses, a list of requirements, and sent packing from building to building on the theory that somehow they will “get educated.” As the old critique of evolutionary theory had it, this is about as promising a strategy for getting an education as would be throwing bricks backwards over your shoulder in hopes that the result would be a nice brick building. When students see no alternative to being customers, then they treat the faculty as fee-for-service providers, thereby serving as further enforcement of neo-liberal administrative designs (Harding, 2007; Hill, 2008).

So faculty strive and compete; students strive and compete; administrators strive and compete. The result is not an efficient free-market organization but rather a mutually exploitative, extractive, and hostile environment in which anything resembling an education is accidental. If the faculty challenge the regime, the administration turns the students against them. If the students revolt, the administration tries to force the faculty to get the students back in line. After all, if the faculty and students ever made common cause, the administration would then have its hands full.

### *Bureaucratization of Academia*

The results of this Tayloristic takeover are profound. The technostructural drive to elaborate administrative procedures that help the administrators gain more power is intensified by bureaucratic requirements for standardization coming from national and international accreditation bodies (for business schools, the major ones being The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD), and Association of MBAs (AMBA) and neo-liberal schemes emanating from the Bologna Process. These new accreditation processes reinforce the shift to viewing academics as widget producers (Ehrensals, 2008) and are used as to justify many organizational changes that administrators would not previously have had the power to initiate. The rituals of verification in Academia, happening in the times of “the audit explosion” (Power, 1997), are developed largely to enhance the administrative power structure. Standardization of academic work serves the purpose of increased managerial control (Czarniawska & Genell, 2002). The reforms eliminate the need for competent and well-informed administrators with relevant academic experience who understand the differences among disciplines,

methods, research time horizons, and the like. Instead they are enabled to impose a “one size fits all” rule for the content of the courses, examinations, research, and publications. Framing assessment exercises, accreditation, and other forms of measuring academic work in terms of “quality” and “accountability” legitimates coercive and authoritarian rules and consolidates new authoritarian forms of academic governance (Shore & Wright, 1999) and a complete lack of administrative accountability to the faculty and students (Behn, 2001; Boden, Ciancanelli, & Wright, 2012; Shore & Taitz, 2012; Strathern, 2000).

The faculty, once artisanal producers of knowledge and teaching, are becoming Tayloristic subjects, to be ruled by organizational engineers—we are becoming “McDonaldized.” Faculty roles are more and more narrowly defined, and everything that can be outsourced (from the point of view of the administration) is. Business schools, many which are highly profitable, take the inglorious lead and offer plenty of examples: for example, University of Liverpool’s highly successful online MBA program relies on instructors recruited from all over the world. These instructors have academic research background, but they had been trained elsewhere. The online school rests on exploiting on other universities’ investments in faculty and relying on the poor job market to enforce the scheme. As one of the authors is a certified instructor in the program and has taught several classes in it, he has observed that this way of managing faculty in a dispersed network results in an academic debacle. Instructors are encouraged to copy and paste messages from the paradigm provided and their time spent online and number of log-ins is registered. Faculty experience very little freedom in how they can teach a given topic.

This control over faculty through external hiring and outsourcing is growing all over the world. For example, University of Phoenix currently employs only 6% of its faculty full-time, outsourcing most of the course design to paid outside experts and the teaching to part-timers. Universities, and business schools in particular, are attempting to adopt these pseudo-corporate mind-sets, without a reflection on the consequences or the meritocratic system and its impact on the faculty (Ruch, 2003; Slaughter & Leslie, 2001). Needless to say, such parasitic strategy, while financially viable, destroys the very foundations of universities’ stability. After all, universities are “organizations for the maintenance, extension, and transmission of intellectual enquiry” (Collini, 2012, p. 134), and reducing them to standardized, repetitive re-enactment of textbook scripts not only does not allow them to maintain or extend the boundaries of knowledge, but also rarely does justice even to the proper transmission of knowledge.

Despite the claims that these are business-like practices, real business systems of manufacturing and service production are evolving away from these mechanistic Tayloristic designs toward more flexible networks and toward fluid and

contingent interactions (Bauman, 2005; Benkler, 2006; Castells, 1996). University disciplinary structures originally were built on an early 20th-century cultural appropriation of the Taylorist industrial model of a division of labor (Newfield, 2008). The model allocated academic turfs to disciplinary groups who could operate then as mini-cartels and control entrance and exist to their professional guilds in a university evocation of the assembly line. The operation of this system has long relied heavily on the status-based professional hierarchies, structures, and relations (Abbott, 1988; Blackler, 1993).

Given the above, it might seem that the new academic administrative Taylorism would simply further this process, but it does not. The academic division of labor always was pseudo-Taylorism designed to create independent academic bunkers controlled by the faculty in support of a guild-type organization. The academy was a set of guilds, each ruled by masters who lorded over journeymen and apprentices in an artisanal system of production. This system certainly was in profound need of being shaken out of its slumber. However, that is not what has happened. Rather, the whole emphasis on accountability has actually reinforced the Tayloristic structures and made the bunkers even stronger.

What is new is the administrative imposition of real Taylorism on academic behavior in which each production unit is now designed, managed, controlled, and disciplined by the university administration and in which the discretionary authority of the guild “workers” has been reduced to a minimum. This means that contemporary universities, instead of evolving their structures in ways resembling knowledge-intensive organizations (such as Google, Facebook, or Apple), are enforcing an antiquated authoritarian Tayloristic manufacturing model that consolidates administrative power and political control of resources and results in massive waste and poor-quality education.

We are not saying that this is entirely intentional. Our work with many senior administrators suggests something worse. They are responding to what they take to be market demands and current “best practices” by distorting the functions of universities to the point that the whole institution becomes dysfunctional, against their own interests and those of all the other stakeholders as well. The levels of stress and frustration among administrators are palpable. Even the oppressors are oppressed.

Academics were among the last highly educated workers who had significant discretionary control over their own working life. Professors now have joined the ranks of the doctors, lawyers, and others who are subjected to hierarchical, bureaucratic control systems, and treated as just another class of line workers to be managed by their superiors and regulated by policy makers.

## Reasons

In his recent book, Benjamin Ginsberg (2011) shows the huge increase in non-teaching and non-research staff numbers and explains that the faculty reign over universities is over. What

he does not explain in full is how the faculty let this happen and what the faculty might do now to counteract at least some of the most disastrous effects of these transformations.

We believe that one of the keys to this power shift in university management is the successful ideological campaign, especially in the social sciences and humanities, defining most academic work as impractical and therefore useless (Jemielniak, 2006). The phrase that is just “academic” is an epitaph for the old order. This is coupled with the commercialization of university research in the sciences and engineering (see, for example, Kirp, 2004; Washburn, 2006) which makes a segment of the faculty into “cash cows.” But in the core social science and humanities circles, having your work defined as practical now is nothing short of an insult. *Knowing-how* (rather than *knowing that*), to use Gilbert Ryle’s distinctions, is synonymous with a non-intellectual approach (Greenwood & Levin, 2001). Even prior to this administrative takeover, it was the case that the ossified disciplinary structures of most universities were not supportive of their knowledge-intensive and knowledge-creative roles (Greenwood, 2009) and universities have long been the antithesis of learning organizations (Argyris, 1999). At business schools, even though practical experience and consulting are often appreciated, it is still rarely possible or encouraged to combine this with research. The role of a scholar has been separated from that of a consultant, and the logic of theory has detoured from the logic of practice (Czarniawska, 2001b).

As a result, the faculty are undergoing free-market shock therapy. No doubt unfreezing a *status quo* often requires an impulse from the outside (K. Lewin, 1951), but this shock therapy is destroying higher education and proletarianizing faculty and students in lock step with the global processes of neo-liberalization.

Do the faculty have the courage to take a hard look at disciplinary structures and organizational habits and use the neo-liberal challenge as an opportunity to change what has long been wrong with us as professionals? Do students have the courage and wherewithal to claim the right to an “education” rather than a program of vocational training, one of proved value with the proof provided by serious study of the life consequences of academic choices? Thus far the answer to both questions is no and the costs are clear.

## Action and Where We Might Go

### *Redefining—Rediscovering Our Role in Society*

If the faculty are to gain validity and legitimacy in the discourse on where public higher education should go, then professors in the social sciences (including management) and humanities have to be able to define and affirm a social role convincingly. The extra-university call for more attention to complex “real-world” problems and to pedagogical strategies involving students in direct, mentored engagement with these problems and the knowledge demands they make is clear and

urgent (Allen & Ainley, 2010). Attending to such problems would be a fundamental change in the universities of the past 50 years. However, it is worth remembering that the once great and successful public universities in the United States were created explicitly to connect with practice and help agriculture and industry (Adams, 2002) and management science itself has engineering and applied roots (Shenhav, 1999). Though being of social value is a self-justificatory promise all young disciplines make (Czarniawska, 1999), the evolution away from practicality and toward bunkered, precious, self-regarding research and teaching has made academia extremely vulnerable to the neo-liberal takeover.

Doing something about all this thus requires many faculty to restructure their relations with the non-academic world.

[C]onventional and many critical forms of education fail to offer *practical* ways of moving forward because they focus on a disembodied intellectual critique from outside practice. This can, ironically, disempower individuals who may feel they are not in a position to influence processes of domination or managerialism [including university administration managerialism as well] (Cunliffe, 2002, pp. 38-39).

Barbara Czarniawska (2001a) suggests that faculty should become “observers dedicated to practice,” which means that even though faculty should not always engage directly in practice, the academic focus should be on the subjects of interest to people outside of academia. Becoming reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983) on a subject of clear public interest could be a working solution to the irrelevance predicament.

Major intellectual gains arise from this. Defining and examining problems according to disciplinary boundaries and neo-liberal imposed accounting schemes assures the irrelevance of subjects studied, methods used, and results obtained. The complexly connected real world offers the best intellectual challenges of all and it is time for faculty to address them and demonstrate that the social sciences and humanities have something of value to contribute. Management teaching and research in particular can seek links with the practice, and play a role in analyzing the organizational turmoil in academia (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008; Perriton & Hodgson, 2013). It also means that, properly crafted, what academics write could actually be of interest to non-academic audiences.

### **Redefining Boundaries**

Proceeding this way would require re-conceptualizing discipline boundaries and replacing academic departmental divisions with client-oriented and project-driven teams (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). This would help address the external world’s needs better, and make faculty jobs more interesting, something crucial for effective knowledge work (Hunter, Jemielniak, & Postuła, 2010). The most innovative and knowledge-intensive organizations of the world have commonly

used project and matrix designs for many years now (Larson & Gobeli, 1987) while academia and the neo-liberal reformers remain uninterested in it and are acting now to increase the Taylorization of academic fields. In spite of the difficulties in going beyond the departmental boundaries, there are examples where academia has succeeded in this effort. As Czarniawska and Genell (2002) observe,

the last 20 years or so have witnessed many failures among the so-called multidisciplinary approaches, but also one spectacular success. We are referring to “studies of science and technology,” which include the sociology of knowledge, the anthropology of knowledge, the philosophy of knowledge, the history of science, semiotics, rhetorical analysis and much else. Up to now such efforts have been mainly restricted to smaller units of knowledge production such as laboratories and to specific communities of inquiry such as disciplines. There is no reason not to extend an inquiry of this kind to the diversified site of knowledge production that is the university. (p. 470)

Business education, in theory, serves as a perfect playground for multi-disciplinary problem solving and teaching. And yet, even there the departmental turfs stand in the way, and very few schools allow for project-driven teaching of different subjects.

### **De-Bunkerization**

The same principle applies to the criteria for becoming a scholar. Academia needs to be de-bunkerized, in terms of making academic careers, as well as research output more accessible. Faculty have to spend their time collaborating in the study of complex, multi-dimensional problems of interest to the world at large rather than fighting to maintain the professional guilds that guarded disciplinary bunkers and eventually brought the wrath of the rest of the world down on the university. (For concrete proposals about university reorganization along different lines, through the strategy of action research, see, for example, Greenwood & Levin, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2007; Levin & Greenwood, 2011.) Business schools could play a major role in setting an example in this respect. Many of them do indeed rely on faculty, who are mainly consultants and practitioners. The formula for bringing this practice back into academia has yet to be discovered. Currently, business schools either accept practitioners as adjunct faculty or professors of practice clearly outside of the regular tenure track, and without the privileges, prestige, and perks that come with it. The practitioners’ input is appreciated mainly in teaching, and there are, as yet, no good models of bringing them into research as well.

### **Learning Communities**

Changing faculty minds has to be accompanied by changes in faculty organizational practices. Because it is necessary to

transform universities into multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder learning communities (Levin & Greenwood, 2001), it is also necessary to redefine and change criteria for what counts as valuable knowledge and what does not. There is a shamelessness in the current way academics often generate publications, grovel before citation indexes and make career progress by the numbers, without connection to the needs of the world beyond the campus. Faculty need to start testing and rewarding the combined practical and intellectual merit of what they do (Greenwood & Levin, 2005), and do so by using standards persuasive by all the relevant stakeholders, not just the hegemony in disciplinary guilds or national accreditation panels and the Bologna reforms.

Another line of change is for the faculty to line up on the side of the students and encourage them to claim, indeed demand, a meaningful education. Arguing for the value of a broadly conceived life of the mind attached to a world of practice and well-honed skills in lifelong learning is not only good for the students but also good for the faculty, returning us to something like the mentoring role and solidarity with students that seems to have motivated the founding of so many academic institutions. Business schools can take the lead here, as they often take the lead in terms of tighter links with the corporations in devising programs of study, internship placements, but they can also easily slide into all what this change should not be about: vocational training.

And ultimately, no transformation would be complete without a transformation of the administrators. Taking a Freireian (Freire, 1971) turn, together we need to liberate the oppressive administrators who are as oppressed by this system as anyone, finding those who have the honesty and intellectual integrity to take more daring steps in the direction of renewing their commitment to being *primus inter pares*, mediating relations between and among students, faculty, and external stakeholders rather than being bosses. Such people exist and finding them, rewarding them, and highlighting their solidarity with the faculty and the students are parts of the necessary change process.

## Conclusion

In the end, the neo-liberal takeover of universities will not work just as neo-liberal schemes to privatize public services and to promote international economic development have never worked. Converting knowledge into a commodity, students into customers, faculty into service providers, administrators into bosses, and research into a money machine turns universities into combined vocational schools, and mini-industrial or theme parks. In the process, higher education itself as a combination of teaching and research, a place for the free development and exchange of ideas, a location for pure and applied research, as a source of broad social mobility, and as the ground on which public-spirited citizens acquire the values and practices of citizenship is disappearing. We all now face

choices. Shall faculty continue to play by the neo-liberal rules being imposed and let the system crash and burn in hopes that faculty and students can someday participate in its reconstruction or shall faculty stand together and fight for those institutional resources that have not been squandered already, making common cause with thinking students, staff members, and citizens? If the recent past is a guide to the future, there is no reason for optimism about a collective faculty or students' response. If the currently secure faculty do not wake up from their delusional dreams about a future like the past, university faculty overall will face degradation and deskilling sooner rather than later. If the students satisfy themselves with following instructions and getting an education by the numbers, their work lives and their personal lives will suffer the impoverishment and inflexibility that this creates. If administrators are not given reasons to care about the intellectual and educational mission of their institutions, then they could just as well run a supermarket and maybe would be happier doing so.

The challenge to initiate some action is particularly relevant to management and organization scholars, whose expertise should be able to suggest pathways for positive change. If the described trends can be averted anywhere at all, it is in business schools: financially independent, already flirting with practice through hiring adjunct instructors, and collaborating with companies (although usually not through research), without the complex of theory supremacy over reality, and for obvious reasons with faculty more capable to discern the administrative takeover taking place, and able to recognize its pathological consequences.

Our own experiences with organizational change processes elsewhere tell us that major changes in universities are possible. In organizations where so many of the stakeholders are well-educated, energetic, and deeply frustrated, the necessary motivation and energy for change exists. In organizations so poorly aligned with the needs and wants of society at large, room for change exists. The key is the development of credible alternative organizational systems and realizing that the neo-liberal emperors have no clothes.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Dariusz Jemielniak's participation in the project was possible thanks to a research grant from the Polish National Science Center (no. UMO-2012/05/E/HS4/01498).

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