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# Mismatch in Higher Education: Neoliberal Shortcomings in Intrinsic Value in the University

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## **Mismatch in Higher Education: Neoliberal Shortcomings in Intrinsic Value in the University**

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### **Abstract**

This research focuses on uncovering how the neoliberal atmosphere in which we find ourselves has influenced and socialized students to view college as a transaction between a buyer and a seller. Neoliberalism promotes free trade, open markets, and consumerism. How does neoliberal ideology affect student choices (i.e. schools, classes, teachers, etc.) that support and undermine neoliberalism itself? How does the internalization of the student-as-customer model contradict or reinforce neoliberal higher education? Higher education has become a complex institution, and free-market trade may benefit or hinder students. Approximately 31 open-ended interviews were conducted with students at BSU, and I conducted a qualitative analysis of these interviews. The criteria for participation required that each subject was over the age of eighteen, was in upper division standing, and was not a current student of the supervising professors. I expect to find that students are guided into education through monetary incentives. Also, I hope to see contradictions in the goals of neoliberalism and the practice of neoliberalism in higher education. It is critical that these shifts in understanding and ideology be researched so that we can interpret the goals and expectations of students.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Neoliberalism, University, Contradictions, Qualitative Research, Interviews, Boise State University, B-STEM, Corporate Scholarship

### **Introduction**

Higher education has increasingly become a center for the practice of entrenched and internalized business-like understandings. These understandings are practiced not only by universities, but also by the students that attend these schools, and society at large, including private organizations. Over the course of recent years, the focus and agenda of universities has shifted. Capitalist functions within the college have established a foothold in education and the rise of neoliberal thoughts, actions, and expectations have paved the way for the creation of marketized transactions within the university, where previously education was valued as a means to broaden one's thought and world view. Economic pressures due to decreased federal and state funding have required that the schools continue to augment their business orientation and adopt innovative rhetoric and understandings in the corporate sphere into that of the educational system.

The university has shifted to neoliberal logics of market-systems that value profit maximization, privatization, and limited state intervention. As the economy has taken a turn for the worst in recent years, enrollment in universities has sky-rocketed. In modern thought, education is the gateway to higher income, mobility, and financial security. In this same period of economic downturn, prices for education have risen, along with debt accrued by students of these universities to astronomical new heights never before thought possible. The emphasis on the need for education has turned the down-trodden public to attempts at revamping their equitable human capital within higher education.

Conversely, private organizations and businesses have sought to exploit the university as a form of training ground for their own agenda. Using the university as a form of corporate training is much cheaper for the businesses, as they do not have to spend as much time, energy, or money on personally training students, or (far worse for them) actually sending their employees back to school. In this instance, students take on the cost of education themselves, leaving them desperate for employment opportunities after graduation, thus allowing corporations to lower pay and benefits continuously.

The business model that has been adapted by the university to remain viable throughout decreased government support is not an ideal system. Students in the university have become accepting to the reformation of education as a business in which they can maximize their human capital, but often times do not fully enact the model in innovative ways. One of which is using non-neoliberal education (humanities, art, education, etc.) to reach neoliberal goals (financial success, job security, employability), but others choose a neoliberal (increasingly vocationalized) education to meet non-neoliberal goals (true interest, preference, personal discovery). This contestation/reproduction of neoliberal education is interesting as it shows that students adapt to education and that they do not inherently endorse neoliberalism.

The curriculum of the university has been more narrowly focused to meet the needs of the corporate economy. The ambiguity in the neoliberal model of higher education attempts to transform education to meet the needs that it cannot meet on its own, namely the use of critical thought that is not innate in some majors. Chiseling away at the periphery of critical thought has taken place as neoliberalism attempts to implement it in various subjects as a means to meet the needs of employers. However, why do students who are fully accepting of the neoliberal model of education (the university as business, student as consumer) continue to challenge this ideology in various ways, sometimes unknown to the actor? I argue that the University-As-Business and University-For-Business models have stripped inherent values in education down to a minimum in an attempt to meet neoliberal goals. However, students have found innovative and complex manners of obtaining critical thought for the sake of neoliberal objectives, thus allowing neoliberalism to save it from itself. Although the university itself is becoming a business on its own, it must depend upon other private resources to sustain, yet, the university is decreasing the skills of its students in an attempt to meet its own interests. Thus, it is failing at meeting the needs of businesses. If corporations received students that were fully critical thinking in the classical sense, then there would be challenges to their neoliberal functions. They want, but cannot survive with, students that are well educated or well informed, leaving businesses lacking the skills to remain a global competitor. Inherent value in education is a threat to both organizations, but is also needed by both, and students will seek it out regardless.

Student's need for intrinsic value in education is critical to maintaining neoliberalism, but it also provides the tools for the deconstruction of neoliberalism. These values can be

transformed in new manners, but neoliberalism is finding it difficult to eliminate the lessons that lie at the heart of such values, such as the need to be able to find inventive manners of solving complex problems and increasing communication skills between people of different backgrounds. Inherent skills that are essential to education threaten the stance of corporations and universities alike in the midst of neoliberalization. Fully enabled students can realize the mistreatment and unequal playing ground of capitalist neoliberal functions and have the ability to disassemble such functions from the inside out. Organizations are well aware of this, and attempt to limit such understandings in academia, thus attempting to preserve themselves while exploiting human capital to its fullest extent.

“The emphasis that policy makers and universities alike place on higher education as a knowledge industry that in turn serves the business, industry, and the global knowledge economy, has promoted views of university study that are increasingly outcomes-driven rather than learning-oriented” (Saltmarsh, 2011: 116). This belief may be integrated in the philosophy of students as well as businesses and the university, yet this capitalist fundamentalism does not account for the goals and standards of students. Based on much of the data collected, many students enroll in the university as a means to broaden their earning potential (an aggressively exhausted neoliberal construction). Yet, other students reject this school of thought in their choice in major and acceptance of the usefulness of non-degree specific courses offered. By both reproducing and contesting neoliberal higher education, students are able to discover where neoliberalism does not mesh within the educational system.

### **Literature Review**

It is necessary for the objectives of this research to clearly define neoliberalism. David Harvey asserts that, “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2005: 2). He goes on to mention that the role of the state is “if markets do not exist, (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary” (Harvey, 2005: 2). In this sense, education has been fashioned anew as a business that must seek to open up markets where once they did not exist to better provide opportunities for the school to grow and students to expand their salable work attributes. Not limited to the university, these new values of free trade and free markets carry with them pervasive effects that can be easily transitioned into ‘common-sense’ understandings (Harvey, 2005). Erosion of government funding and the promotion of privatized public sectors, according to Clawson and Page (2011), led to the adoption of business mechanisms that have come to dominate the higher education field we see today. In higher education, then, paying tuition and going to class taught by a professor is seen as a transaction between a buyer and a seller which the consumer can transform the product into equitable skills.

With the emphasis on outcomes-based expectations on part of the students, the university aims to better indulge these rising ‘demands.’ Since education is increasingly being seen as a transaction between consumers and service providers, ideal neoliberal situations would seek to improve lucrative majors. This is evidenced by Mark Olssen (2007) in which he argues that the goals of the neoliberal university in terms of pedagogy should include slanderization of courses,

vocational learning, and mode 2 learning which he defines as “knowledge which is linked directly to the functional imperatives of the world of work.” Therefore, profitable majors such as the physical sciences, mathematics, engineering, business and technologies should be the main focus of the university because they are directly related to specific job-skills. Furthermore, education is treated as a necessary faction of the economic production of countries in the neoliberal setting and is measured by their economic output (Saltmarsh, 2011). Those that have a high-yielding monetary sector are treated as more valuable, receiving increased funding and attention while those that do not succumb to economic pressures suffer under-funding and de-emphasis. The bolstered majors then become much more attractive than they may have initially been. Departments receive new buildings and new technologies that draw students in because (obviously) if the department can afford such expansions, they must be doing well in terms of enrollment, therefore offering more lucrative career options.

Private businesses are also actively engaging in the university now. As public funding for universities continues to fade, colleges and businesses look to partner together. This scenario becomes mutually beneficial for the university and the corporation. As Michael Delucchi and William Smith (1997: 336) argue, “...universities give students new facilities, research tools, technology, etc. that they will then charge more for.” They also cut deals with businesses that privatize research findings that are funding through that corporation and even those that are funded through the state. This is due to a change in law:

They are also capitalizing on a change in federal law, implemented just over two decades ago, that laid the foundation for today’s academic-industrial complex. In 1980, mounting concerns about declining U.S. productivity and rising competition from Japan propelled Congress to pass the Bayh-Dole act, which enabled universities to patent federally funded research on a large scale for the first time. (Washburn, 2005: 8)

These less stringent laws allowed universities to lure in corporate partnerships. With the new discoveries being made and patented by colleges using federal funding, institutions could license out the invention to corporations in exchange for royalties and other fees with little overhead cost and instant-gratification on the part of the business. Corporations also look towards universities as a means for training employees so that they do not have to, saving them time and money.

According to Clawson and Page (2011), the goals of the faculty in a university should be to advise, guide, and mentor students while dually requiring students to take courses that are not specific to their major. This is contradictory of the highly specialized courses that neoliberalism aims to promote in the university. As this form of thought continues to penetrate college, less emphasis is placed on a wider array of course requirements. Students begin to occupy a highly marketized and commodified education system which does not harvest creativity and critical thought, placing their education investments on grades and ‘real-world’ uses of their gained knowledge. However, this seems to be troubling since, “More and more undergraduate students receive an education that has been highly packaged, and, in the US at least, (post)graduate students are cheap laborers...” (Canaan and Shumar, 2008: 7). Students are meant to be taught what they need to know for their future careers in the university, while also gaining credentials that will make them attractive in the labor market. In one recent study of a group of 444 graduated students 5 years after graduation, only four out of every ten students found a job after college that required a degree and half of the graduated students were getting less pay than they hoped they would receive with their degree (Stone, et. al., 2012). It would seem that the

education students receive does not highly augment their opportunities in the workforce or guarantee the skills necessary to succeed in the competitive job market.

Exceedingly specialized course studies in the neoliberal atmosphere would ideally increase one's ability to transition into the highly specialized workforce initially after graduation. Business model ethics in the university pursue more marketable students in terms of corporate interests, emphasizing knowledge production and research that can be turned into a marketable commodity (Saltmarsh, 2008). Students, therefore, should internalize the neoliberal model to the extent that their course studies should value only those that pertain to their major, leaving all other courses to those that wish to study them. Traditional liberal arts studies are given the status of 'useless' in the real world while studies that promote revenue, innovation, and entrepreneurialship are valued most of all.

There has been a shift from the values and goals of education within the rise of neoliberal ideology. "Students, as rational economic actors, changed their goals from what were largely intrinsic, such as developing a meaningful philosophy of life, to larger extrinsic goals including being very well off financially" (Saunders, 2007: 54). This has been accompanied by the focus of the university modifying the goals of education from civic engagement, political activism, democratic education, and learning for its own sake. Yet, the needs of employers have not excluded these factors from marketable skills that make candidates more employable. As pointed out by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, some of the skills that employers look for in a college graduate include: The ability to work well in teams—especially with people different from yourself, the ability to write and speak well, the ability to think clearly about complex problems, the ability to be creative and innovative in solving problems, and a strong sense of ethics and integrity ("[LEAP | Information for Students | Top 10 Things Employers Look for in College Graduates](#)"). The preceding factors cannot be easily achieved through highly specialized and focused education. A broader and well-rounded education is crucial to gaining these skills and being able to apply them in the workforce, or in non-work related endeavors.

In *The Varieties of Intrinsic Value* (1992: 119), John O'Neill describes, "Intrinsic value is used as a synonym for non-instrumental value. An object has instrumental value insofar as it is a means to some other end. An object has intrinsic value if it is an end in itself. Intrinsic goods are goods that other goods are good for the sake of." The value of something cannot only be measured by its applicability alone, but also how it influences upon other matters. Not everything can maintain this instrumental value, and must have other non-instrumental factors that relate various objects otherwise not seen as associated. So is the same within intrinsically educational values.

Erich Fromm (1976: xii) states that, "Knowledge... No longer consists in the reduction of data to mere statistical order, but as a means of liberating mankind from the destructive power of fear, pointing the way toward the goal of the rehabilitation of the human will and rebirth of faith and confidence in the human person." In this view, knowledge attainment can give people the ability to create new ways of thinking, not in terms of profit maximization, but in terms of human advancement. But, according to Fromm, the great promise of unlimited happiness and material abundance has restricted the realization of such knowledge. The loss of intrinsic values establishes a community that cannot improve upon itself but rather it can only maintain or destroy that which it has gained. The values of traditional higher education should maintain "a passionate pursuit of truth, a commitment to nurturing students and helping them develop a

defense of free speech and freedom of research, a dedication to decisions based on long-run collective values rather than short-run self-interest” (Clawson and Page, 2011: 17). If the neoliberal model of education were to be fully integrated into universities, possibilities of advancement in humanity would be less likely. Furthermore, there would be a limitation placed upon the availability of new and innovative careers, as education would be focused on the vocational jobs that are already available and not upon the creation of new occupations, thus limiting the entrepreneurial ventures highly touted by neoliberalism. My research aims to identify the loss of intrinsic value in higher education as the goals of universities and businesses realign against the goals of students.

### Methods

This research was conducted through qualitative, open-ended interviews. A sample of 31 students at Boise State University was used to create this research. The basic criteria that had to be met by participants were: they must be 18 years of age or older, they must be in their junior or senior year with upper-division standing, and they could not be a student of the supervising professors at the time of the study. No particular major was sought out or focused upon. Participants were recruited by the research conductors through email, class announcements, and word-of-mouth. Seeking out students of the university enabled us to further understand the personal experiences and opinions they held with regards to higher education and at Boise State in particular.

The interviews were conducted by a group of undergraduate researchers with related, but unique, focuses. With our development of a research tool that allowed each interview to speak to the issues focused on by individual researchers, each interview lasted about one hour in length. These interviews were electronically recorded and shared between researchers. They were then transcribed and shared with all researchers. Sections of research questions concerning major choice, acceptance of the business model in the university, experiences with science, technology, engineering, math, and business courses, acceptance of theoretical corporate scholarships (with guidelines and limitations), opinions on who should pay for college, and courses not specific to the student’s major were included in my research tool. This frames the analysis of how much they believe in the ideology of the business model of the university, while also speaking to the limitations of this ideology.

Student participants were given \$20 as reimbursement for their time at the end of the interview and were also guaranteed anonymity. This was accomplished by assigning each participant a random number in lieu of names as identifiers, and recoded at the time of analysis with pseudonyms. They also agreed to be recorded, with direct quotations being used within the analysis of our research. Interviews were conducted between November 2012 and February 2013 in private offices on the university campus. Interviewees were also given the option of ending the interview at any time.

I believe that Boise State University is an extreme case to neoliberalization as it has a history of being a commuter school. Conventionally, students attend a commuter school to maximize their earning potential and learn marketable new skills, so they are essentially more accepting of neoliberal modes of education. It is more likely, then, that Boise State can speak to more extremes of entrenched neoliberalism, although it is continually being reformed to fit the “traditional” university model in which students are between the ages of 18 and 24 and attend

directly after high school. Boise State still retains much of its commuter school characteristics, with 48% of students attending in the 2012-2013 academic year between the ages of 21 and 34 and 40% of students attending part-time (Boise State Facts and Figures, 2012).

While conducting the interviews, participants offered a number of opinions and explanations for the business model of the university. Nearly no interviewee disagreed that the university is run as a business. Yet, contradictions of neoliberal ideology, student practices and adherences did arise. Using the general acceptance of the business model as their internalized form of neoliberalism, I hope to identify other factors that are highly neoliberal in nature such as B-STEM majors (business, science, technology, engineering, and math) and opinions about major-based core requirements as opposed to taking classes outside of one's area of study that undermine ideology in the student's own understandings, opinions, and experiences.

### **Internalization of Neoliberal Education**

Recall that many of the goals of the university run in tandem with business interests of privatization and revenue. When asked why the university is a business, Valerie responded, "I mean just, even the bookstore and applying for graduation was forty dollars, everything is a business, they're trying to make a profit, reasonably so, I mean they need to." Valerie blindly accepts that the university requires profit and should do so through student's tuition and fees. After confirming that students are the customers of the university, Valerie was asked if there are any disadvantages to being a customer, to which she, "No I mean I think we should be treated more like customers." In her view, being treated like a customer means more say in the university in terms of curriculum and "professor evaluation." This is reinforced by Jamie. When asked about the advantages of being a customer in the university she responded, "I think the fact that students are customers gives a little bit of play into deciding how things are run at BSU" and, "As college students, we're paying for an education and we're paying for their time to teach us. If we're paying for their time, we should have a say in how they teach." The demand for more customer-like value is critical in the neoliberalization of the university. These opinions support outright that college is and ought to be run as business, with focuses on customer satisfaction and revenue. Views of this nature offer no opposition to the dominance model of neoliberal higher education, and thus continue the tradition of acceptance of such terms. When Jamie believes that we should be placed into a more entrenched role of student-consumer, she internalizes individualistic principles that highlight competition, efficiency and discipline. Students become enthusiastic followers of such beliefs and in turn continue to reproduce it in their image in many more aspects in their life.

The university then has 'no choice' but to adhere to the demands of more corporatized methods of conduct. These methods have been extremely beneficial for the university in that they are able to focus funding on certain studies that give students practical skills for the job market. Once the gates are open for this transaction, universities may become more akin to vocational institutions.

Valerie has internalized neoliberal ideology. Neoliberalism focuses tuition costs onto the student and their families. Valerie, who receives her tuition on her parents dollar says of full-ride scholarship recipients, "I've seen in people, at least, in group projects, I don't even know why they tell me they have a full ride, but I can tell they don't work as hard" and when asked why that was, Valerie responded, "It's just on someone else's dime, it's free, who cares." This

contradiction of Valerie's own tuition funding and that of people who also do not pay for their education is inherent in neoliberal higher education. She does not think that education should be given out for free, but gladly and openly accepts tuition being paid by her parents, as if she has earned more of a right to education because her parents can afford it. Ideologically, Valerie does not take handouts and does not think that others should as well, but in practice, Valerie is going to school at no personal cost.

Lance also navigates the difficult terrain of neoliberal education in troubling and ambiguous manners. When asked, "What's the product since the school is a business and students are consumers?" he responded by saying, "It depends who you're looking at as consuming a product. Like students, I think it would be education." Previously, however, Lance stated that, "if I walk out of a classroom happy or felt that I learned something I think that the service provider has done their job so I think it is a business completely." On the surface these statements seem to coincide. However, when you imagine the transaction between a customer and seller, this is highly controversial. Unlike many professional settings (e.g., medical, legal, accounting, engineering and architecture) the university requires extensive "customer" involvement to complete these transactions. In many, if not most, professional services, the customer can rely on the expertise of the service provider and not as much on their own developed knowledge of the system. Acquiring a degree requires extensive effort that would not be experienced in a traditional professional service, nor is the customer evaluated in the same manner as is the student (Brennan and Bennington, 2000). Therefore, Lance should be able to pay the service provider (teacher/school) and receive education without any direct involvement in the process on his behalf. Obviously, this is not the case. Students must complete work and ideally engage in knowledge attainment, no matter what their course of study, to receive what they are paying for, unlike most business dealings. Lance, as a marketing major, believes that he has the insight of business mechanisms to correctly equate the university as a company stating that, "I am a business student and marketing like when I go into a class I see the professor there as a service provider and the students as consumers." Yet, this scope of thought is a contradiction within itself in that it requires direct involvement in the transaction.

Contestation between the business model and the university surfaced in some cases during this research. Juan agrees that the university is a business, but goes on to say, "It tries to get the most while giving the least, it tries to get more money and cut services, so in that way it functions like a business. It ebbs and flows toward trying to maximize profits, so that it can become bigger and more renowned, which I think is an ill-focus." Disagreement in the way the school is altered into a business marks a challenge to the system on the part of the student. Juan is an outlier in this case, as he is among the minority of students that oppose the acceptance of the business model. In his view, the university should not be concerned with the profit margin over the needs of their students. He employs the basic knowledge of the market system in which businesses try to cut costs at every corner so that they can maximize their income.

If the university is focused upon extracting money from students more than on providing them with the necessary skills to achieve their goals, this is inherently against neoliberal ideology. The for-profit model is designed in such a way to propose that the competitive nature of business will keep costs low while providing the best product possible. This is not the case in recent years as universities continue to increase their costs while the global competitiveness of the United States has decreased. Students are not receiving the skills that are necessary to remain a top economic actor, but are paying astronomic costs. The values of education have shifted, and

the more they are focused upon the applicable knowledge of the current state, the less they are grounded in creating a more diverse economy that can grow.

### **University-As-Business V. University-For-Business**

I have found that there are two general models in which Boise State is attempting to place itself. Often seen as interchangeable, these models are the University-As-Business (UAB) and the University-For-Business (UFB). In the case of UAB, Boise State has gradually become run and perceived as a business. With goals of profit and prestige, Boise State seeks to realign its faculty in a competitive manner that will increase productivity and grant funding. With fees hidden at every corner (Boise State has begun charging an overload fee for students taking 18 credits or more), increased marketization (the university has also sold its logo rights to Nike), and out-of-state student profiteering (total cost of attendance estimates non-resident students will pay nearly \$12,000 more than their in-state counterparts) Boise State has transitioned into a new form of university, that of the University-As-Business. Students can now enjoy coffee from Starbucks and a sandwich from Subway on campus, further funding the university with the little extra money they have as the result of tuition increasing 6.8% annually over the last 5 years. The consumerist values maintained by the university tend to discourage critical thinking and exclude students from having the opportunity to have a say in knowledge attainment, attempting to cut down on the inherent values of education so it can be utilized by students in the workforce. Students are now expected to learn from more “pre-packed” forms of pedagogy, with little room for the inherent value of education – that of discovery and original thought.

Conversely, Boise State has attempted to increase its standing within private companies throughout the area. As economic and commercial pressures influence universities to adopt the business model, corporations are eager to fill the holes left in the budget of the university. Diminishing funding has led to the university seeing the advantages to corporate partnerships and private industry. “Institutions are beginning to form contractual relationships with corporations and collaborate in technology transfers and building construction” (Saunders, 2007: 50). The Norco Nursing building on campus is a privately funded construction, and Norco continues to promote their products to students so they will use them upon employment. Micron is another business that has infiltrated Boise State with two building constructions in the last 12 years, with one building having each room sponsored by various businesses. When asked what Micron has meant to Boise State, College of Business and Economics (COBE) department head Amy Moll stated:

I would say they are the reason we exist. They are the ones who have really driven the university and the state to create this college. And they have consistently come in support of us. Everything, [including] funding for the Micron Engineering Building. They were the funding and the push creating the materials science department, and then the funding for the electrical engineering Ph.D., and then last year they provided the support to start up the materials science [doctorate]. (Roberts, 2012)

Micron is the driving force in both funding and need for this specific program of study, and the head of the department is more than happy to enter into a contractual relationship with Micron.

Boise State has begun to weave connections with businesses as a way of funding their expansion, and in return allow these corporations to have an influence within the classroom as the university has become a center for B-STEM majors (Business, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). With the proliferation of these majors, Boise State further attempts to serve the needs of the growing global economy, but, “Basic science for use and basic technology may provide narrow forms of discovery and education that do not sit well with concepts of public good” (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004: 49). Colleges are increasing their focus on that of employability after completion. Students are being left to think that applicable skills directly tied to corporate business are the only ones that matter. Yet, corporations are dependent upon critical and original thought to stay competitive in the global market, but simultaneously denounce it as it is dangerous to neoliberalism because it can be weaponized to deconstruct the current system.

Imagine that students who are well-versed in such social constructions such as neoliberalism that thrive off of oppression, low pay, and high profits were to enter the corporate global economy. This would undoubtedly lead to some unrest on the part of corporations and perhaps eventually lead to a revolt of the masses. However, critical thinking is essential to the maximization of large businesses. They require it for innovation and problem solving, but fear it for its destructive power. They have turned their gaze towards higher education and charged them with the task of training students with the acceptable amount of innovation in exchange for hefty donations.

In response, universities look to promote majors that can easily be funneled into the job market, while maintaining low standards for critical thinking. Not only are the universities actively attempting to fit the needs of businesses, but they are also being supported by government officials. As one Florida Governor, Rick Scott, put it so eloquently, “I want to spend our dollars giving people science, technology, engineering, and math degrees. That's what our kids need to focus all their time and attention on” (Weinstein, 2011). Rick Scott has also supported bills that would lower tuition for STEM majors and raise it for all other students as a way to funnel more degree-seekers into “profitable” majors. In his view, education is only truly valuable if it is “useful to corporations and don't teach students to question social norms” in the terms of the author. Public opinion holds that education is the key to unlocking higher income after graduation, as long as your education is in a lucrative major, as majors such as art and humanities do not provide the same financial incentives. Students, through higher earning, therefore, are able to obtain the “American Dream” (uninhibited consumerism). Not only are universities and businesses attempting to exploit these goals, but students are aggressively clamoring to achieve them as well.

These majors have been elevated to the forefront of education because of their earning potential later in life. The engineering majors saw a 20% growth between 1999 and 2010, while medical/medical sciences saw a 61% growth, and biology grew by 35% during the same period (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). However, while the average yearly income for a male with a bachelor's degree in 2000 was \$56,700, it fell to \$49,800 in 2010, a 12% decrease. Women with bachelor's degrees earned \$44,200 in 2000, but by 2010 this amount fell to \$40,000 a year, nearly a 10% decrease (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). The promise of financial success due to a college degree has significantly dropped for both sexes, yet many B-STEM majors continue to see extreme growth because of the neoliberal marketization of these fields.

## Traversing Neoliberal Battlefield

With all of the challenges facing higher education today, the inherent value in education endures in interesting and complex ways. It can be utilized to maneuver and, in some cases, circumvent the neoliberal model. Carry began her college career as a business major. Nevertheless, Carry asserts that, "I just felt like I needed to use my Spanish. So I decided to go into education. I really like teaching." Instead of subscribing to the marketized major of business, Carry wished to pursue an education in something that she was passionate about. She individualizes her personal goals through her non-neoliberal education by attempting to use it for a neoliberal outcome. In this case, internalized neoliberal goals of this student suggest that neoliberalism utilizes intrinsic values to further its own agenda, consequently saving it from its own pitfalls.

She has enhanced her neoliberal competitiveness to achieve a non-neoliberal job that does not fit this model. Although education is a critical aspect of neoliberalism as a reproduction of competitiveness and an actor in wealth generation, it has little grounding in the promise of high pay and entrepreneurial advancement, thus making it an obsolete form of study in its own standards. Education maintains to be a highly lucrative major, with Education being Boise State's 9<sup>th</sup> most popular major (Boise State Facts and Figures, 2012). Carry's testimony would suggest that although a higher income is a goal of obtaining a degree in education, following one's passion is also a goal. It would also suggest that government jobs are still sought after, even though neoliberalism seeks to privatize the commons of education.

After asking Carry if she ever contemplated engaging in a B-STEM major, she said, "I don't feel very comfortable, and it's not what I like. It's not my passion or what I'm interested in, so no." With threatening low pay and limited job markets, neoliberalism seeks to eliminate such values of preference and critical thought. Carry opposes this popular belief, although her ultimate goal is to find a job through higher education. She hopes to pursue a career that she is passionate about, yet also wishes to have some degree of job security. Neoliberal idiom, according to Clawson and Page (2011), argues that subjects that do not lead to grant funding are seen as less valuable. Education would fall into this spectrum. Teachers that do not instruct students on how to best maximize profits, cut costs, create markets, and promote free trade are seen as a waste, offering a peculiar form of contestation to neoliberalism. But education is valued in neoliberalism because it teaches learners the worth of competition amongst peers and critical thought (the right type of critical thought that is). However slight this contestation of neoliberalism may be, it is significant in that it shows students seek to combat the funneling of students into majors that directly benefit private corporations.

Another measure of the ambiguity of neoliberal ideology within the university is that of courses required that are not specifically related to one's major. Contestation of these modifications has arisen in this research. Interviewers asked each participant if they should be required to take classes that are not a part of their major. In response to this question, Cliff (a civil engineering major) stated:

Um, yeah last semester I was taking a theater class with that example and I kind of thought at the beginning that this is pretty useless, but during the course I figured that it'd teach me how to be a critical thinker. It's teaching me how to be more open with people, and there are a lot of things that core classes teach, that

people, if you're thinking these aren't part of my major, that people miss out on. And I think it's a really good thing to have these core classes.

For Cliff, he is required to seek out skills in critical thought and communication outside of his own major. Instrumentalizing critical thought in terms of marketability gives him the insight into the usefulness of inherent value in education, constructing it as a work skill. By exiting the realm of his specific major, one that is “guaranteed” to land him a successful career, he is able to find success in his own terms. The pre-packaged information that he receives from the civil engineering department have cut the inherent values of higher education down to the bone, forcing him to seek it elsewhere.

Cliff also feels that many students do not see the usefulness in courses that are not a part of their major. These courses have been socially stigmatized to the point that students do not want to take these classes, even though, as Cliff states, they miss out on things that these classes teach. Students also feel that if this were a true business transaction, then they should not be required to pay for classes that they do not see the financial benefits of directly. Some wish to take courses that will confine them to doing the only job they are trained for in a vocational degree.

Although his credentials in engineering can allow him to find employment, he must use the skills otherwise not found in his major to succeed at his career. The UAB promotes this major as one that will unquestionably lead to a higher yielding position in the corporate economy, and Cliff accepts these terms as a means to achieving his long term goals of raising a family. However, Cliff has also realized that the UAB conflicts with the idea of UFB. UFB would want him to be educated in his field with knowledge in critical thought and communication so that he will be the most efficient employee. The University-As-Business will receive what they want (tuition and corporate sponsorship), but will leave businesses wanting more in return. One benefit to this exploitative system for organizations is that students will be left so desperate for employment at the time of graduation that they are more willing to settle for less. With student loan debt now being higher than credit card debt in America, students are forced to take jobs that pay less than they did a generation ago, and work longer hours to preserve their position, leaving them unable to protest for better working conditions. As Slavoj Žižek (2012: 12) asks, “Who dares to strike today, when having the security of a permanent job is itself becoming a privilege?”

Another student offers his own solution to gaining the skills that will make him more marketable and successful. Although, admittedly, he would have chosen sociology or philosophy major if there were, “things I could do after college,” Carson has chosen to major in Construction Management, after realizing that a business major is not what he wanted to do. Carson has also been involved with the Honors College so that he could, “take more classes that [he] enjoys.” But because of the construction of these classes and majors, Carson did not see them as viable options, until he could overcome that with the Honors College program. This program allows him to better marketize himself and to make him more attractive to employers, but it also allows him to take courses that he enjoys and is passionate about. To this student, the only way that these courses would be a possibility is if they guaranteed him a more appealing resume. He also asserts that a summer reading program offered to him through the Honors College was one of the more memorable experiences of his college career because “in

construction you don't do any writing, so I joined the honors college because I like writing and reading a lot. I hate numbers but I like construction.”

Carson, like Cliff and Carry, must seek out his own fulfillment in critical thought and passion. What he enjoys will not make him any money, but he can utilize portions of the university to reach his personal goals. The university seeks to render these goals as useless, as they will not provide you with the skills employers are seeking, yet employers are specifically seeking these attributes. The university again extracts what it wants from him (money) and offers him up to corporations. The social construction of education has limited his options to a select few majors (ones that he doesn't necessarily enjoy). Although businesses need employees that are ready to start working right away and solve complex issues, they do not want them to solve the complex issue of the oppression of people's passions and goals. Carson must seek means of obtaining his education outside of his major to enjoy the benefits of the education he is denied.

### Conclusions

As students are faced with more pressure to obtain their goals through higher education, universities continue to marketize themselves as the only solution to problems of unemployment and low pay. Universities must limit the education that they offer as a means of training workers to be complacent and willing to follow those ahead of them. They must also provide corporations with workers that are self-reliant, innovative, and capable of critical thought and analysis. These skills are often times conflicting and the interests of the UAB and the UFB seldom coincide.

As this shift occurs, remnants of classical forms of education remain at the forefront of student's educational experiences. I argue that the University-As-Business and University-For-Business models have stripped inherent values in education down to a minimum in an attempt to meet neoliberal goals. However, students have found innovative and complex manners of obtaining critical thought for the sake of neoliberal objectives, thus allowing neoliberalism to save it from itself. Carry, Cliff, and Carson all wish for a well-paying job and security, and actively seek out critical thought and fulfillment as a means to procuring these goals. They cannot see that education seeks to destroy their personal fulfillment to fit into the neoliberal mold, starting with inherent value in education, followed by the loss of inherent value in work. As Slavoj Žižek (2012, p. 115) points out:

Daniel Pink refers to a body of behavioral science research that suggests, sometimes at least, external incentives (money rewards) can be counterproductive: optimal performance comes when people find intrinsic meaning in their work. Incentives may be useful in getting people to accomplish boring routine work; but with more intellectually demanding tasks, the success of individuals and organizations increasingly depends on being nimble and innovative, so there is a greater need for people to find intrinsic value in their work.

By stripping away what is needed not only for the individual, but also for the organization, both parties lose what they need to survive in a healthy manner. Students

no longer have the ability to receive outright the education they want, thus leaving businesses to suffer as well. With the promise of more financial freedom in the future (money rewards), many students are able to survive college by completing their boring routine work. However, when they reach their careers, they wish for activities that are more intellectually challenging. Žižek goes on to explain that participants in the behavioral science study were more likely to give their intellectual efforts to organizations that they felt strongly about, not for their company. Do students not act in much the same manner? They cannot offer up their best work in classes that are of no interest to them day by day. Yet, the classes they feel compelled to work hard in (those that interest them) they often do quite well in, no matter the monetary outcome of taking the course.

These are the implications of this research. As universities, companies, and the general public continue to funnel students into majors that don't necessarily interest them, or subjects other than what they have a passion or desire for, these same experiences will continue to occur in workforce. Disengaged workers that don't value what they do and are disenfranchised. No matter the pay, the behavioral study suggests, people struggle with meaningless work, and wish for something more enlightening, impactful, and challenging.

Neoliberalism seeks to narrow down education into an institution whose aim is to train obedient workers. With the need for more professionally trained employees, the university seeks to serve the interests of corporations, and students openly accept this transformation. However, the intrinsic values of education are still widely needed in student's goal attainment. The need for better communication, critical thought, and enlightenment are still needed in the job market, but are increasingly being pushed out of major programs that value their ties with the corporate world such as Business, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (B-STEM).

As limitations are being placed on the student's ability to seek out critical thought and other intrinsic values, the university also places a limitation on the economy. Neoliberalism requires such values, but identifies them as dangerous to the overall success of the ideology. It is challenging for neoliberalism to maintain a population that is educated to the point of becoming innovative market actors and not educated enough to the point where they can see the flaws of the system itself. Businesses wish for this imperfect balance to retain their prestige in the global economy, but are unable to receive such employees because of the threat they would naturally carry with them. Neoliberalism has constructed an education system that does not allow for students to cope with workplace difficulties and reflection, thus they are ill-equipped for any real significance in the corporation. Critical thought is a key aspect of neoliberalism in its simplest meanings, but becomes dangerous when it can be used against the ideology. It can be employed to deconstruct the oppressive systems that keep many at the bottom of the economic food chain, thus eliminating many inequalities that are necessary for maintaining such a structure.

This research was limited in that in the initial interviewing process, questions were not specifically geared towards the issues of intrinsic value and critical thought. Instead, this focus was discovered during the analysis of data. Therefore, it would be beneficial to ask direct questions about this topic in further research. This would allow for a more thorough analysis of the topic, thus shedding more light on the issue.

Education cannot carry on the way it has for the last three decades. Students are being steered away from things that they enjoy, businesses are looking to capitalize on low-cost

training in contractual relationships with universities, and universities are being privatized for profit. The goals of higher education have been widely lost in this transition, but remain in ways that seemingly cannot be eliminated. Students actively seek out the inherent value in education not only as a work skill, but also for self fulfillment.

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