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money talks: the language of the corporate university

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We wrote The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy to open a conversation about the deleterious effects of corporatization on the intellectual life of the university and the well-being of faculty, staff, and students. We argue that the corporate university is concerned above all with efficiency, resulting in a time crunch with far-reaching implications. Power is transferred from faculty to managers, economic justifications dominate, and the familiar "bottom line" eclipses pedagogical and intellectual concerns.

We wrote *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Berg & Seeber, 2016) to open a conversation about the deleterious effects of corporatization on the intellectual life of the university and the well-being of faculty, staff, and students. We argue that the corporate university is concerned above all with efficiency, resulting in a time crunch with far-reaching implications. Power is transferred from faculty to managers, economic justifications dominate, and the familiar "bottom line" eclipses pedagogical and intellectual concerns. We turn to the Slow movement as a way to challenge the frantic pace and standardization of contemporary academic culture. At one of our presentations, a disgruntled senior administrator opened up the question period with: "Nothing you have said resonates with me. You keep using the term 'corporatization of higher education.' What does that even mean?"

It had not yet been crafted, but *Postsecondary Education Metrics for the 21st Century*, recently published by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) (Weingarten et al., 2019), would have offered him a crash course. An agency sponsored by the Government of Ontario, HEQCO provides policy recommendations to the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities in the form of research papers. We chose this document for close reading here because it offers a concrete local manifestation of a global phenomenon. Its lexicon, as we shall see, is familiar to (almost) all of us. We need to be wary of this familiarization because the measured tone—excuse the pun—of the document is persuasive. The rhetoric is a decoy. We are in troubling times when a report lauding metrics describes itself as taking the path of "the idealist" (Weingarten et al., 2019, p, 6) and when "enhanced data availability" heralds "a new golden era" (p. 7). As Stefan Collini (2017) writes in *Speaking of Universities*, "there is an insidious process by which we become what the categories we use every day tell us we are" (p. 59). You don't need to be a literary critic to recognize the slippery signifiers in the HEQCO document; "sustainability" and "reap[ing] … rewards" (p. 3), for example, are emptied of any environmental or personal meaning. Taking its "inspiration" from the "United Kingdom [and] its Office for Students and its Research Excellence Framework" (p. 17)—widely denounced by UK faculty and the literature on higher education—the report celebrates "efficiency," "success," "effectiveness," "impact," "outcomes," "actionable evidence," and "continuous improvement." These are all measured in exclusively financial terms.

The "educational journey" (pp. 10–11) at the centre of the document, indeed the only one it can imagine, is one of "economic lift" (p. 3). Students need only "numeracy, literacy and critical-thinking skills" (the latter reduced to problem-solving) in order to "access good jobs and successful long-term careers" (p. 9). The success of a University's graduates will be measured by individual "tax-linked data", and students' future income-tax returns will "drive improvement at the program level" (p. 2). Above all, universities must provide students with "efficient pathways to graduation" (p. 7). While student success is measured by "income lift", faculty success will be measured by income lowering. Claiming that the "largest sector expenditure" is "its people", the report proposes monitoring "how much people are paid (compensation) and what they do (workload)" and recommends the findings of an earlier report:

> [I]f full-time faculty members not active in research were to teach twice the load of their research-active colleagues, the overall teaching capacity of the full-time professoriate in Ontario would increase by about 10%, a measure equivalent to adding about 1,500 additional faculty members at no additional cost. (pp. 14–15)

Problems with this are numerous, not least of which is making fewer jobs available to our highest-educated graduates. Jerry Z. Muller (2018), in *The Tyranny of Metrics challenges the "faith" (p. 20) in measuring:*

> Although there is a large body of scholarship in the fields of psychology and economics that call into question the premises and effectiveness of pay for measured performance, that literature has done little to halt the spread of metric fixation. (p. 13)

Access and equity are made much of in the HEQCO report, but we wonder how the suggested metrics will ensure their actualization. By the document's own admission, research shows that "same-program graduates from high-income families outperform those from low-income families in the labour market. Birthright perseveres" (p. 12). If structural hierarchies and discrimination, or to use their antiquated term, "birthright" continues, we need the very disciplines and social-justice focused programs whose graduates tend not to earn high salaries. And given the document's suggestion that programs should be reviewed "with a focus on remediating or ultimately abandoning those with poor labour market outcomes" (p. 11), the place for radical social critique, as many have pointed out, threatens to shrink within the corporate university. The document takes as a given that it is "archaic and unhelpful" (p. 16) to regard public universities and colleges as distinct from private career colleges and apprentice systems. This is considered too self-evident to be argued.

By their own admission, the authors' proposed metrics aren't refined enough—yet—to measure everything: "Research, innovation and community engagement are all components of the business that we have yet to determine how best to measure and track from an outcomes-focused perspective. We'll get there" (p. 17). This, in our view, highly unwarranted confidence is an example of "metric fixation". Complex intellectual activities are not easily quantifiable which is precisely their value in non-monetary terms.

Days before we submitted this essay, the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) (2019) published an exposé of the senior leadership of HEQCO. Its imposition of

austerity measures, particularly on faculty salaries and pensions, is highly ironic given that its lead researcher "reached a secret deal (…) for a pension top-up worth a total of $4.5 million" (para. 5). The OCUFA report calls for the dissolution of HEQCO and the redirection of its governmental budget to student financial aid. This push-back confirms the position we take in *The Slow Professor*, that the corporate take-over of higher education is not complete. Faculty resist internalizing the market categories we have drawn out here. We need to remind ourselves that there is a community of dissent on the links between money and higher education. It's not all over.

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