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# A Growing Way to Critically Analyze the Field of Student Affairs



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**T**his literature review presents a bridge between current use of critical theories in student affairs and contemporary political critiques of higher education. The purpose of this review is to provide one response to the call for increased use of critical theories in student affairs by drawing on trends in academic capitalism to suggest implications and areas of future study for student affairs. This paper employs a both/and view of understanding the presence of critical theory in student affairs as both an organizing topic and specific form of methods.

### **The Current Role of Critical Theories in Student Affairs**

Recently, critical theories are more prominently cited in documents incorporated into the profession of

student affairs. Critical theories in student affairs have been used in professional philosophy statements, student development theories, as well as new works of research exploring student experiences and campus practices. Learning is transformational when supplemented with critical reflection including both academic and developmental changes (ACPA & NASPA, 2004). Through the charge of transformational learning in ACPA & NASPA (2004), the national professional organizations of student affairs suggest an orientation open to and engaged with critical theories perspectives. Critical theories have also played an expanding role in student affairs research into applied practice, especially its incorporation with student development theory. Student development comprises one of the many responsibilities entrusted to student affairs practitioners and seeks to impact

students in making positive, conscientious decisions about the self, learning, and life. New directions in student development theory exist while noting the prominence of queer theory, Critical Race Theory, and feminism perspectives. Social status, intersectionality, and multiple dimensions of identity are additional critical components to be considered in challenging existing student development theories.

In addition to projects focused explicitly on student development, studies seeking to understand a variety of student experiences, practices, events, and services on campus utilize critical theories as their theoretical foundation. A survey of current literature utilizing critical theories reveals a tendency toward projects of Critical Race Theory, feminist theories, and queer theory with other approaches gaining traction as well. While critical theories have a growing influence on the field, the uses of critical theories in student affairs still tend to focus on making sense of individual professional practice or student identity differences before, during, and after college. The next step in integrating critical perspectives into student affairs is a shift from an individual focus to a perspective that analyzes the larger political system surrounding the profession.

### Emergent Themes in Academic Capitalism

Usage of critical theories in student affairs do not include a thorough interrogation of the political economic environment surrounding higher education and its relevant implications. Academic capitalism has been used to understand how shifting political conditions have encouraged universities to

move closer to the market by taking part in market and market-like activities. As the connection between higher education and the market strengthens, literature on academic capitalism cites a number of impacts on individuals, institutions, and the world. Although outside the scope of this review, academic capitalism has strong ties to the increasing global nature of neoliberal markets and economies as well as the ways in which higher education serve to support this expansion. Other themes in research around emerging Academy-Industry Relations (AIRs) and their impacts present a number of patterns relevant to student affairs practice.

Academic capitalism's impacts on students and on various institutional practices are of particular relevance for student affairs consideration. In examining the impacts of academic capitalism across and within institutions, one major theme is how academic capitalism connects with students. Academic capitalism repositions students from engaged collaborators in inquiry into a convenient revenue stream, consumers of a private good, and a raw product for the market. As state funding decreases at many institutions, universities use students as a method to compensate for budgetary deficiencies. The prohibitive cost of pursuing higher education contributes to a growing disparity in access to higher education by students who are not able to afford its rising cost (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000). In addition to shouldering the financial burden of lagging state funding, students also become consumers of a commodity in an environment of academic capitalism. As consumers, students seek the product that will best position them to enter the market after graduation. As academic capitalism rises in higher education, students are situated as consumers



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of an educational product rather than partners in educational inquiry. Finally, academic capitalism recasts students as products available for consumption by the marketplace. In a climate of academic capitalism, businesses are placed as the ultimate stakeholders investing in the product of higher education—its graduates. Students become the raw products to be input into an educational process designed to create outputs of hireable professionals (Bousquet, 2008; Nelson, 2010; Slaughter & Rhodes, 2000).

Coupled with academic capitalism's influence on students, academic capitalism also has numerous impacts on institutional practices including both budgetary and subsequent administrative practices. Drastic changes in higher education budgets are one of the precipitating factors in the development and proliferation of academic capitalism. As government provided less and less financial support to higher education, universities or university members began engaging in market or market-like activities in order to secure additional funds (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Increasingly, institutions are seeing AIRs as filling in the gaps of decreased state subsidies but not without corresponding complications. Developing AIRs through entrepreneurial and market-like interactions has had profound results on funding within higher education beyond simply adding new monies to the bottom line. First, the neoliberal move toward the market and augmented market-like behavior in higher education alters departmental funding priorities with higher financial investment in departments closer to the market. In receiving institutional funding, areas with strong potential connections to the market, such as biotechnology or engineering, are disproportionately supported over public service areas, like education. As well as altering departmental funding priorities, academic capitalism has reconfigured what happens at the completion of a research project, especially for results that have potential market value. Rather than being released to the public, market-relevant outcomes, results, and breakthroughs accomplished through AIRs are moved to the private sector for further development through technology transfers. Changes in funding expectations and priorities thus create drastically different experiences for faculty members and administrators across the disciplines. To produce in a climate of academic capitalism where state funding is low, faculty members are encouraged to seek out

research projects with potential market value, which can draw faculty away from teaching. In addition to productivity, the questions of accountability and value are mounting, particularly for faculty in areas considered farther from the market. Throughout all levels of education, conversations about accountability measures and quality assurance are prominent. However, there is little agreed upon definition for either quality or accountability, so assessments and evaluations have defaulted to language and perspectives of the market. Without clear direction for quality or accountability, academic capitalism increases uncertainty about future job security for full-time faculty members in fields not as valued by neoliberal markets.

### Implications and Future Directions for Student Affairs

Academic capitalism provides a critical lens to understand the political climate surrounding higher education in the United States and its interplay with the experiences of students, faculty, staff, and administration. Application of the themes in academic capitalism results in a number of areas for future consideration including equity and access to higher education, responsibility of student affairs professionals to navigate changing political climates, and a pressing need for philosophical examination of professional practice and relevance within the current political context of higher education. Although used primarily in discussions of other areas of the university, the themes documented in literature pose interesting applications for student affairs professionals as well as related questions for future consideration. One major area of concern and application to student affairs involves the disparity of access. With limitations to access in mind, student affairs practitioners must deeply interrogate the implications of who is and is



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not arriving on campus. How do changes in student populations as well as subsequent institutional responses drive and alter student affairs practice? Should it? Additionally, practitioners should also focus on examining, analyzing, and critiquing the larger systemic shifts driving funding disparities impacting student affairs budgets, and ultimately, student costs. While systemic analyses are scrutinized and published, a philosophical question facing student affairs professionals is to critically assess our own work for the interplay between student affairs programming and rising student expenses.

In addition to questions of access, critical analysis with attention to academic capitalism offers a number of extra considerations. A growing trend within student affairs practice is reliance on assessment data as justification for the field's continuation. As student affairs professionals, do assessment methods seek to understand student learning and development, or do assessment means simply reinforce a consumer mindset? While academic budgets are decreasing, faculty members are turning toward partnerships with private industry to fill in growing budget needs, so what does the future hold for student affairs professionals facing mounting budget concerns? Do similar partnerships become a strategy in student affairs?

If so, to whom does that make student affairs responsible? Engaging institutions of higher education with the local community has potential to open up spaces for potential resistance to academic capitalism. In that opening, can student affairs become an agent that actively challenges and resists the rising trends of academic capitalism? What strategies would student affairs employ to do so? Through research? Through facilitation of student programming that is critical, outspoken, and radical? Shifting from an overwhelming focus on vocational preparation, will student affairs work to refocus on an education for freedom to act in a shared world? Or will student affairs practice replicate academic capitalism's focus on vocational preparation to live? Student affairs is indeed positioned in a precarious decision point: to remain unaware of the vast reach of academic capitalism, and thus, become subsumed by it, or to seek a lens of critical reflection that challenges, resists, and subverts academic capitalism's pulls. Ultimately, the challenge for student affairs is to actively involve the profession in analyses of academic capitalism as it has already had profound impacts on other areas of higher education.

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