

What's wrong with corporatizing Canada's universities? Plenty!

by Claire Polster and Janice Newson

A serious problem for progressive people nowadays is that neoliberal discourse has become so established, so commonsensical, that it is difficult to publicly question, much less challenge it. How can one argue with claims that public institutions such as our universities should be more accountable, or provide more value for money, or enhance our nation's competitiveness? We now proceed to take on some seemingly unchallengeable aspects of the neoliberal corporatization of our universities: the process through which they are made to work more for, with, and as businesses. For we believe that there is plenty wrong with this process that needs to be understood, named, and resisted for the sake of our universities and for those who work and learn within them, our citizenry, and our society.

Below we provide brief responses to 10 "what's wrong with this" questions that are frequently raised in university hallways, on public airways, and in everyday conversation. While much more could be said in response to each question, the following answers are a starting place to initiate some much-needed debate.

1. What's wrong with using Canadian universities to make Canada and its businesses more competitive in the global economy?

One of the university's many purposes is and should be to contribute to economic growth through research, educating the next generation of workers, and various forms of interaction with groups and organizations relevant to the economy. The problem arises when this becomes its *primary* purpose. The narrow focus on economic competitiveness can and has undermined the university's ability and/or commitment to achieve its many other purposes. Paradoxically, this focus may also impair the university's ability to enhance competitiveness, such as when easy access to university professors discourages corporations from developing the in-house expertise that is crucial to their success, or when universities develop their own publicly subsidized businesses that unfairly compete with other Canadian enterprises. Ultimately, its appropriation for the competitiveness project may destroy the very things about the university, such as its traditions of openness and collaboration, and its cultivation of creative and unconventional inquiry, that made it attractive and valuable to industry in the first place.

On another level, unquestioningly promoting Canada's participation in the global economy, as it is currently taking shape, is not a good thing to do. Serious questions need to be raised about advancing a global economic order that may, for example, impoverish whole segments of the world's population and confine them to work that serves the economic interests of a few powerful multinational corporations. Rather than being a handmaiden to it, the university should be one important place where critical analyses of the relative benefits and harms of economic globalization take place.

As well, that the university should be solely committed to

the well-being of its own citizens is a narrow and regressive conception of it when considered in historical perspective. Traditionally, universities have held a more universalistic sense of their place in the world and of their obligations. Whether following a narrow, nation-focused path would be fruitful for a small country like Canada to pursue is worth serious consideration, both from a moral and purely self-interested perspective.

2. What's wrong with tightening university management structures?

Perhaps the most serious consequence of the tightening of universities' management structures is that it shifts control over the institution to groups of administrators, and thus excludes faculty members, students, staff, and community members from setting priorities and participating in important decision-making. It also reduces transparency in university operations, encourages secrecy, and moves us further away from democratizing our public institutions.

Additionally, greater managerialism has led to a dramatic expansion in the size of academic administrations, with more and more new positions being created, such as assistant and associate vice-presidents and deans, and intellectual property and public relations managers. This growth has significantly raised university operating costs. It has also increased the administrative burden on staff and faculty, diminishing resources and energies for core academic activities like teaching and research, and reducing the flexibility and responsiveness of individual academic units.

At the same time, administrators are becoming more involved in activities traditionally carried out by departments and faculties, such as the hiring of new professors and the awarding of tenure and promotion. This produces additional inefficiencies and erodes academic motivation and morale, when, for example, administrators unilaterally override hiring and other decisions that were the product of difficult, time-consuming, and costly collegial deliberation.

The tightened university management structure has been key to linking up universities and corporations. It would be hard to imagine the process of corporatization in Canada unfolding to the extent that it has without tightening up and centralizing control over universities' resources and activities, as the corporate sector would have had no university partner capable of negotiating the technical and legal complexities inherent in new partnership agreements involving the exploitation of intellectual property, the construction of new buildings, etc.

3. What's wrong with making universities and academics more "accountable"?

Universities and academics should certainly be accountable. The questions are "accountable in what sense?" and "accountable to whom?" Ironically, corporatization has increased the need for accountability to the public by enabling

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A narrow focus on economic competitiveness has drawbacks

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new kinds of, and more opportunities for, conflicts of interest to arise. The experience of Dr. Nancy Olivieri, a researcher who was penalized by her university for putting patients' interests over those of a corporate partner, is one of many cases that illustrate the point.

At the same time, however, universities' adoption of corporate practices actually prevents the public from holding universities accountable. For example, the public is prevented from seeing university contracts with corporations because they are protected by proprietary rights. As well, university administrations and Boards of Governors increasingly make important decisions about their institutions' futures behind closed doors in order to keep their competitors—other universities—from finding out about their strategies for attracting students or corporate clients.

Additionally, the "performance-based measures" being increasingly adopted by universities, research councils, and government ministries allow for only a limited kind of accountability and frequently cause more problems than they solve. They enable certain groups, generally powerful and well-resourced groups who dominate the process of producing these measures, to impose their priorities on academics and prevent others from having their needs taken into account.

For instance, these measures tend to focus on economic priorities, such as the number of patents universities produce or the numbers of graduates who find employment, rather than on other priorities, such as universities' or students' contributions to equality or social justice. They also encourage academics to act instrumentally by shaping their activities to maximize performance scores, and they make it more difficult and/or risky for academics to follow their own rhythms and inclinations in their research and other work.

The production, analysis, and follow-up of performance measures are also costly and time-consuming. They increase the bureaucratic rigidity of universities and thereby limit innovation and creativity. At the same time, these performance measures cannot grasp the complexity

of academic activity, and therefore often distort it and/or render key aspects—such as providing support and mentorship to students—invisible and thus undervalued. In so doing, they mask the need, and limit the calls, for more robust forms of accountability to the public.

4. What's wrong with government more directly shaping university activities?

Government should be expected to ensure that universities are functioning according to certain standards. For example, it should ensure that universities are academically sound, that they do not discriminate against any segment of the population, that they meet health, safety, and labour standards, etc. But government should not shape the content and/or process of research and teaching in ways that limit the independent judgment of academics and students in their search for knowledge and understanding. Governments should also not intervene in ways that either prevent academics and their students from focusing on the things that they consider to be most important and valuable, or that *compel* them to focus on needs and issues that government considers to be important and valuable.

Historically, governments have not been successful in predicting future research or training needs. Moreover, government does not possess the ability to control either intellectual insight or where knowledge breakthroughs will occur, given that they are notoriously unpredictable. Trying to do this only frustrates and impedes the process of knowledge development. The best that governments can and should do is to provide the conditions under which knowledge production can flourish.

If universities are to truly serve the public interest, they should have the free space, and must also be strongly encouraged, to pursue research and teaching programs that may be critical of, or not in line with, the will of specific governments.

5. What's wrong with ensuring that the public gets "value for money"?

Citizens should be confident that the university spends public monies

responsibly, wisely, and carefully, and achieves as much social benefit as it can with the funds it has available. The idea of "value for money," however, is not about ensuring that all members of the public will benefit equally.

"Value for money" forces universities to streamline their activities—often eliminating services which benefit segments of the population who are economically, socially, and/or physically disadvantaged—and to off-load their costs so that only those people and groups that are well-resourced can afford universities' increasingly high fees. More generally, "value for money" encourages universities to initiate activities that generate money, thus engaging them in commercial endeavours which in various ways may compromise the university's publicly-oriented mission and values.

Additionally, "value" can be deceptive because what appears to be valuable from one perspective may in fact prove to be quite costly. For example, an improved method of oil extraction which may be highly profitable and valuable in terms of increasing supplies can also be harmful to certain individuals, communities, and/or the environment. Moreover, in addition to the actual costs of creating "valuable products," opportunity costs may be incurred which are invisible but substantial nonetheless. Such is the case, for instance, when investing funds in the production of lifestyle and "me-too" drugs (such as the many drugs for erectile dysfunction) leads to the neglect of more broadly valuable disease prevention research.

"Value for money" may lead people to focus on easy-to-measure and immediate expressions of value, rather than on expressions that are harder to measure but bring longer-term and/or intangible benefits such as solving a long-standing scientific paradox or creating a beautiful sonata.

6. What's wrong with making universities and their research "relevant"?

The public should expect universities to promote knowledge production and transmission that are relevant to their needs and aspirations. However, the

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Our universities should serve more than business interests

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version of “relevance” that has been advanced through the corporatization of the university is not relevance to the public as a whole or to a broad spectrum of groups and communities. Rather, it is relevance to the objectives of major economic actors such as private corporations.

In this context, “relevance” is a code word for serving the interests of business and making the university itself more like a business. Not only does this narrow universities’ actual relevance in the present, but it also limits their potential relevance in the future. For, as universities respond more and more to the economic needs of corporations, service to business becomes institutionalized, and the flexibility that allows universities to be relevant to new, more diverse needs as they arise is reduced.

Moreover, when a knowledge quest is being designed, to whom or what it will be relevant is often not knowable. The requirement or expectation that researchers should know ahead of time the specific relevance of their research blocks knowledge quests whose value may only be known after they are completed and are either elaborated by, or add a missing piece to, subsequent academic investigations. Many knowledge quests that have become extremely relevant to a specific societal need or advance were originally pursued solely because a researcher was motivated to pursue an interesting question.

7. What’s wrong with encouraging competition between universities and inside universities?

Generally speaking, the increased competition within and between universities, which has been exacerbated by new “performance-based” forms of federal support for Canadian university research, encourages administrators and academics to become increasingly concerned with their own self-interest or their institution’s interests, and, in so doing, to become diverted from the public interest. In turn, administrators and academics in the present context are made even more vulnerable to demands from government and industry.

More specifically, competition has led to a range of behaviours that are harmful to universities, faculty members, the scientific enterprise, and the general public. These include universities raiding one another for “star” academics; promoting secrecy and reduced collaboration in research; diminishing the influence of collective bargaining as a way to establish institutional fairness and collaboration; and engaging in costly legal battles (such as those around intellectual property rights) either to protect or advance their positions relative to other universities. Competition is also leading universities to waste valuable public resources on branding exercises and advertising campaigns in various media to attract students, a wide array of expensive initiatives to help academics better compete for external research funds, and bidding wars over new faculty appointments that drive higher the costs of qualified personnel and create greater pressure to increase tuition and other university fees.

8. What’s wrong with rewarding the “best and brightest” academics and universities?

It is not obvious who the “best and brightest” actually are. Too often, such assessments are political in nature, but even in

the cases when apparently objective measures are used, these measures may be problematic. For example, using research grant earnings as a primary indicator of “excellence,” as is now being done in the advanced stages of corporatization, is not only ineffective, but may also harm Canada’s research enterprise in several ways.

On the one hand, some people are more skilled than others at writing grant proposals, or simply need more money to do their kinds of research, or are more able to meet the requirements of granting programs such as finding a well-resourced research partner to provide matched funds. Similarly, some universities are historically more endowed with resources that allow them to better compete for the increasingly large grants now being awarded by research councils.

On the other hand, concentrating funds in the hands of an élite group of academics and universities deprives others of the financial support for work that may be equally or even more valuable and relevant to societal needs. It is also harmful to academic institutions because it creates divisions between high money earners and their other colleagues and often affords the former higher status and greater influence in departmental and faculty decision-making. In turn, morale and motivation among the rest of the faculty suffer.

Further, the principle of “best and brightest” is damaging to science more generally. Perversely, it actually reduces Canada’s research capacity and limits its diversity (given that more funds flow to fewer researchers and research areas) and thus impairs the ability both to train the next generation of scientists and to open up new lines of inquiry. In fact, it tends to ossify research inquiry by reinforcing scientific orthodoxies and directing support only to research whose value has been recognized in an established field of inquiry.

9. What’s wrong with letting professors and universities make money off their research and other activities?

Although it is not necessarily the case, there have been ample instances, both in Canada and elsewhere, particularly in the United States, that show that the public interest may be seriously compromised when the university and/or its faculty members reap financial benefits from their research. From the mistreatment (and even wrongful death) of research subjects, to the fudging of research results, to the patenting—and re-patenting—of life-saving drugs, greater numbers of researchers and administrators are acting unethically in order to enhance their personal and institutional fortunes. They are also suppressing researchers, research projects, or research results that threaten their own or their universities’ financial interests. The public interest may be harmed in more subtle ways as well, such as when fruitful collaborations and open debates of ideas and their applications among colleagues are either delayed or do not take place altogether for fear that they will jeopardize profit-making potential.

As well, professors who invest time in commercializing or marketing their research findings often withdraw from the day-to-day activities of maintaining their departments, faculties,

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Corporatization's long-term harms are far outweighing the benefits to universities

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and teaching programs, leaving the responsibility of this work to their colleagues. These imbalances in workload frequently generate resentments among colleagues, not least because money-making professors often also have the ear and favour of university administrators and are thereby able to secure more privileges or exercise greater influence on decisions.

At another level, all universities do not have the same ability nor opportunity to generate and profit from money-making ventures. Thus, their engaging in these activities may harm the Canadian academic enterprise as a whole by exacerbating the historical and regional imbalances among our nation's universities.

It is worth further noting that the university's involvement in entrepreneurial activities—be they setting up spin-off companies, licensing valuable intellectual property, or marketing knowledge-based products—is very expensive. It adds significantly to the costs of universities, and these costs fall primarily on taxpayers and on students who pay increasing tuition and other fees. At the same time that the public subsidizes these profit-making activities, it is universities and academics themselves who are personally reaping the financial benefits. Given that universities are public institutions and that academics are public servants (they are paid a salary with public funds), surely the fruits of their labour rightfully belong to the public.

10. Is there nothing at all to be gained from the corporatization process? Does it not benefit the public in any way whatsoever?

The corporatization process has certainly produced some isolated and specific benefits for some professors, students, parts of the university, and corporations. But these benefits are far outweighed by the cumulative and long-term harms of corporatization, such as impoverishing many parts of the university, creating divisions and weaknesses within and between academic units, and reducing the university's ability and willingness to respond to a diversity of needs in society as a whole.

Ultimately, however, we think that it is less important to focus on the benefits and harms of corporatization than it is to focus on what it leads the university to become, and what this transformation means for the well-being and future of citizens. Corporatization converts universities from public-serving institutions into knowledge businesses; that is, it changes the university from a publicly accessible resource for social development that benefits a diversity of groups in a wide variety of ways into an institution that produces products and services for specific markets and paying clients.

Whether or not the Canadian public supports this transformation has not been asked. Instead, the decision to pursue this transformation has been taken by default, and, in some respects, by stealth. Citizens need not—indeed, *must* not—uncritically accept this development. We can and should examine and question what has been done to our nation's universities, and from there take steps to ensure that they clearly reflect our collective will and fulfill our aspirations.

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Drink

I saw an ad that said "Drink Canada Dry" and I've just started.

—Brendan Behan.

They told me what I was drinking was slow poison. So who's in a hurry?

—Robert Benchley.

I have taken more out of alcohol than alcohol has taken out of me.

—Winston Churchill.

A woman drove me to drink and I never had the courtesy to thank her.

—W.C. Fields.

There is no such thing as a small whisky.

—Oliver St. John Gogarty.

Love may make the world go round, but whisky makes it go round twice as fast.

—Compton Mackenzie.

Candy is dandy, but liquor is quicker.

—Ogden Nash.

One more drink and I'd have been under the host.

—Dorothy Parker.

Alcohol enables Parliament to do things at eleven at night that no sane person would do at eleven in the morning.

—George Bernard Shaw.

I'm not so thick as you drunk I am.

—J.C. Squire.

An alcoholic is someone you don't like who drinks as much as you do.

—Dylan Thomas.

I have a rare intolerance to herbs, which means I can only drink fermented liquids, such as gin.

—Julie Walters.

Drunk driving is putting the quart before the hearse.

—Ed Baldwin.

One of the disadvantages of wine is that it makes a man mistake words for thoughts.

—Samuel Johnson.

A bumper of good liquor
Will end a contest quicker
Than justice, judge, or vicar.

—Richard Sheridan.

'Tis pity wine should be so deleterious,
For tea and coffee leave us much more serious.

—Lord Byron.