

Academic Labor

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Who's Sitting in the President's Box?: Development and the Neoliberal University

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At universities around the United States, the President's Box refers to a room, or suite of rooms, at stadiums used for VIP purposes. The President's Box serves as a venue where development officers and university administrators entertain private and corporate donors and lay the groundwork for fundraising priorities and activities. For donors, the President's Box offers the best seats for athletic events and just as frequently the best food and drink. For development officers and university administrators, it's a site where some of the most important fundraising work gets done, all of it organized around athletics, all of it oriented around the ostensible desires of wealthy individuals whose love for sports teams is said to transcend the realm of the rational. The President's Box is shrouded in mystery: what happens in the President's Box tends to stay in the President's Box. Try getting the names of those invited to sit in the President's Box at your own university (even armed with a FOIA request) and you'll get a sense of how carefully universities guard this space, those who occupy it, and the conversations that take place in it.

However much universities are supposed to be organized around the free exchange of ideas, the President's Box offers a powerful symbol of the private and secretive interests that govern the work of even public universities these days. Of course, the intensification of an entrepreneurial imperative in all institutions of education has paralleled the privatization of public institutions in the United States aggressively initiated by President Ronald Reagan. At the private university where I received my PhD, nearly a dozen years after Reagan first took office, development was a fact of life, particularly when it came to research. My first experience of this occurred when I was a graduate student, affiliated with a center for research on women. One of my friends—a postcolonial scholar—was a postdoctoral fellow at this center and was expected to attend dinners with established and potential donors. She was young, beautiful, charming, and cosmopolitan. By all accounts she was a great success with the older white couples who constituted the philanthropic base for such cultivation efforts. Few of us were comfortable with the politics of these development efforts, but all of us understood them to be necessary evils. Research on women wasn't an institutional priority, and if we wanted to continue to fund the center, its activities, and its post-docs, we had to participate in development efforts.

At that point in the 1990s, private institutions had been revving up their development activities for some time, but public institutions soon followed suit. Although, as a grad student at an Ivy League

school, I understood the role that development played in funding university construction, program building, and faculty lines, as an assistant and then associate professor at a less elite institution, my everyday life was insulated from these economic exigencies. Perhaps this was because my department was fairly well funded, but I suspect that it was also because the pressure to secure external funding was only beginning to register in the humanities. It wasn't until I became director of a women's studies program, in the midst of a very aggressive capital campaign, that I began to understand the extent to which development would figure in my future as a feminist and a media scholar and the extent to which an entrepreneurial ethos would shortly redefine my work as a tenured professor. The dean of my college made it abundantly clear to me that if the program were ever to receive additional support from the university, we would have to fundraise for these activities. That is, while other programs received support from the university for teaching, curriculum, and departmentalization, we would have to figure out our own strategies for supporting this work. I did manage to close on a cultivation effort that predated my directorship, but fundraising for women's studies was a tough sell in that part of the country. Worse yet, our attempts to fundraise were stymied by administrators whose development demographic was an older white man with a stay-at-home wife. One wealthy woman we brought to campus for a visit revealed to me that she had been raped as an undergraduate by another student in the early 1970s and that women's studies had provided a lifeline for her, connecting her to rape crisis counseling and a community of support. Her relationship to the university was understandably conflicted, but she wanted to find a way to support a program that had supported her. This donor never did fund the program, because, she later told me, the dean had condescended to her in a meeting (asking repeated questions about her husband) and made no effort to understand her contradictory relationship to the institution. Women's studies faculty members were not invited to that meeting, it being understood that we could participate only in lower-level meetings.

Like most university activities, development is a distinctly gendered and racialized business, with a cadre of mostly white women who are responsible for regional development efforts and whose job it is to "cultivate" donors. Particularly in a state as white as Oregon, donors are understood to be white males who have little to no interest in diversity, except as it affects athletics. Decisions about development priorities, at least in the institutions where I have worked, are made by white male development officers and administrators. The agenda they set for development is as predictable as it is depressing: athletics, natural sciences, and business. Look around new building construction on campuses around the United States and you'll see the results of their "asks" (or requests for funding)—new stadiums, labs, and business schools that all bear the names of the donors who subsidized them. These facilities will go on to be run mainly by white men, and the work that goes on within them (and the profits that are generated) will benefit that same demographic. Try asking for funding for child care centers, centers devoted to nonviolent conflict resolution, or funding for cluster hires of women faculty members and faculty members of color in the disciplines where these are most sorely lacking, and you are bound to get a distinct sense of development priorities.

Like the old network system in broadcasting, development officers shy away from anything "controversial" or anything that might possibly be perceived as diverging from the status quo, fearful of angering potential donors. And again as in the old network system, institutional priorities are driven by how agents of the institution understand their donor demographic. Where the ideal consumer for prime-

time programming in the heyday of the network system was thought to be white men, aged 18–45, the ideal donor for development is understood to be a white, middle-aged to elderly man who is said to want to invest in a very narrow range of items. These are some of the things I've been told about these men over the years by development officers at a number of institutions:

- Donors are emotionally invested in universities because of athletic programs.
- Donors like science and sports and business, but the humanities are a hard sell.
- Donors don't care about culture (e.g., literature, theater; exceptions are sometimes made for film).
- Donors don't like to fund faculty research or items that directly benefit faculty, because they think that faculty members are whiney malcontents who don't work very hard.
- Donors don't want to invest in child care facilities since they don't believe these are important.
- Donors don't want to fund scholarships for minority or women students, since they perceive those as unfair.

Who knows whether these claims are true? Very few faculty members are permitted to interact with major donors; when they do, it is in very controlled circumstances. In addition, development is not a well-researched area of university work but functions mainly through forms of seldom-interrogated common sense and whimsical personal experience. People give money for often-unpredictable reasons. The center I'm directing right now, for example, was funded by a bequest from a New England donor who, angered by Harvard's handling of him, decided to send his money west to establish a center for research on women.

In many ways, development discourse functions as a variation on the third person effect: we (development officers and university administrators) understand the importance of race and gender, but donors (those third persons) do not. Although donors are often made to take the blame for the conservative nature of development activities and institutional funding mandates, these communicative doldrums allow administrators to perpetuate the financial status quo by displacing responsibility for it onto third persons. Thus, the university pitches construction of yet another athletic-related facility to Phil Knight or T. Boone Pickens and then laments the fact that donors are willing to fund only athletic-related facilities.

Not only do development efforts drive university budgets; the need to fundraise to compensate for massive cuts in state funding is having greater impact on our everyday lives as communications scholars and teachers. Where development was once the work mainly of a cadre of development officers, deans of schools and colleges are ever more likely to find the bulk of their time dedicated to raising money to make up the shortfall from the state (in both operational costs and any enhancements they imagine to their programs, whether in terms of scholarships for undergraduates or technological or infrastructural needs). Indeed, most deans now assume that much of their work will involve development, but no one seems to be talking about what this redefinition of administrative work means in terms of a broader

redistribution of labor. When a dean is expected to spend much of her/his time traveling around the world to meet donors, to attend development-related events (like football games), and to strategize about fundraising, that's time s/he cannot devote to administering a school. For assistant or associate deans of departments and schools, this translates into an increased workload; for tenured faculty members, this means more committee work (as decisions get delegated to standing and ad hoc committees) and more clerical work (since faculty members don't have the administrative support reserved for deans and department chairs or heads). For the school or college as a whole, this translates into a real vacuum in leadership, since deans often don't have the time or energy to build programs and be involved in the day-to-day mechanics of managing egos and providing a cohesive environment for often fractious and difficult faculty members. I don't want to minimize the important role that deans play in fundraising, since quite often they're the only people sitting in the President's Box who have any experience with the on-the-ground realities of research, teaching, and service, but the increased burden of fundraising means that someone has to do the work of management. And universities aren't paying anyone to take on that additional labor but, in the tradition of the downsized corporation, are expecting subordinates to pick up the slack.

Thus, the situation we find ourselves in at public universities is one in which we have been abandoned by the state, as Pierre Bourdieu puts it in *The Weight of the World*, and driven to seek support via external fundraising for a wide range of activities previously supported by the state (Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 181–254). This process isn't new—it's been unfolding since at least the 1980s, particularly in the sciences where underfunding has resulted in ever-increasing corporate influence. However, in the wake of the market collapse of 2008, our predicament has become ever more painfully evident, as universities eliminate departments, tuition rises, and universities make ever deeper cuts into already eroded budgets. Those public universities that were historically the best-funded have been hardest hit. Those that weren't—like my current institution—are pursuing privatization plans of their own. The state of Oregon now contributes a meager 5.7% (around \$46.5 million) to my university's operating budget.

I am not optimistic about our ability to fight back at this moment in time, at least not in the terms currently in play. In my opinion, labor struggles and the wider fight for the soul of public education in the United States have misrecognized the core conflict. Until we are willing to engage in a fight to end the wars we've been involved in for nearly a decade—until we can agitate for the demilitarization of our economy—we will make no headway in our efforts to rebuild public education in the United States. That is, until the funds now devoted to military aggression can be redistributed to our crumbling public infrastructure, little can be done. We need to end the war before we can turn our energies toward the long and difficult work of re-building public infrastructures. Chances are that those sitting in the President's Box aren't going to be our allies in these ventures, given the deep and intimate connections between the sports-industrial and military-industrial complexes. Progressive academics need to do a better job of fomenting and supporting anti-war activism on their campuses, promoting an understanding of continuing attacks on public institutions as a direct effect of the war machine. We need to push our unions to also engage in and support anti-war activism as our best hope for a future in which public education is once again viable in the United States. And we need to constantly remind our colleagues and our students about the price that poor and working-class kids who don't have access to university educations are paying for the benefit of multinational corporations made rich by military aggression worldwide.

References

Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The weight of the world: Social suffering in contemporary society* (P. P. Ferguson et al., Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.