Educational Alienation: The Erasure of Self-Determination in Higher Education

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At the present moment, institutions of higher education in the United States are severely underfunded, undervalued, and in decline. Additionally, misappropriated funds, administrative irresponsibility, and questionable planning initiatives have brought about stagnation and atrophy from within the university.\(^1\) The student body and faculty, who are continually pressured to adopt unjust means of education, and who have surrendered nearly all autonomy in the process, have felt these effects most greatly. Although the semantics have been broadened in the contemporary era, the consequences of these processes can only be described as alienating.\(^2\) Higher education in the United States, and particularly in California, has diminished student and faculty self-determination, deemphasized the human component of learning, restricted access to a fair and equal education, and distanced academia’s relationship to knowledge and higher learning. The alienation that the university is currently experiencing is not only crippling to a generation of students and professors, but also indicative of the values and principles of the United States. In accordance with traditional conceptions of the theory, several types of alienation in higher education exist, and are clearly discernable through a further examination of the university system.

Foremost, students are alienated from the education they receive, while faculty members are alienated from the education they supply. In both cases, neither the student nor the professor determines the ‘product’, that being the education or degree. Rather, disassociated administrators set guidelines, mandate curricula, and allocate funding. Student and faculty freedom have been severely minimized, while significant decisions are increasingly being made at the administrative level. Administrators appropriate education and shape the university system in order to maximize efficiency and the production of degrees. Critical thinking, individual needs, lifelong learning, and community engagement are surrendered in exchange for isolated online classes, streamlined educational processes, and ‘employable’ graduates.

Most importantly, education is treated as a commodity, and as a use value that explicitly eliminates any connection or relationship between the student and his or her education. In other words, administrators gain control over the education process, including the intellectual and artistic capacity of the student or faculty member. Education is seen not as an enriching or liberating process in and of itself, but rather as a means to an end. An education, according to administrators and officials, should provide the student with a career, and prepare them to enter the economy. Also, as government and non-government agencies devalue the significance of the humanities and social sciences, they seek to solidify concepts that have previously never existed. This includes the notion that certain disciplines, namely those associated with science, mathematics, or business, are somehow more ‘marketable’ than those associated with human experience, sociology, and the

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\(^1\) For an example of questionable planning initiatives, please see “The Parker Document,” http://thesocialjusticeproject.files.wordpress.com (look under “Resources” tab).

\(^2\) For more on the theory of alienation that this essay draws on, please see Marx’s Theory of Alienation by István Mészáros or Marx’s Concept of Man by Erich Fromm.
condition of humanity. Therefore, the purpose of education is to accumulate tangible wealth and material gains, rather than foster a deeper understanding of humanity and the world. Moreover, this means that education is not for the public any more than it is for the students and faculty. Instead, it is for the economy, the corporations, and the financial system at large.³

The student body and faculty are also alienated from the action of learning and teaching itself. Standardization of classes and the curriculum not only diminishes the constructive capability of education, but mandates repetitive, trivial, and detached modes of learning and teaching. Most of the time, these demands emanate from outside university departments, and in most cases, outside of the university itself. Students, faculty, the college, and the department lose control over learning and teaching, and thus are further alienated from the action of teaching itself. As a result, courses offer little intrinsic value or intellectual gratification. Furthermore, with little self-determination over his or her education, the student, or faculty member, fails to connect with the concepts, subjects, and broader implications of the curriculum. The outcome is disassociation and disconnectedness from within the university.

Disengagement is increased exponentially by the pressure to receive a ‘marketable’ or ‘employable’ degree, and by the threat of higher tuition and diminishing faculty salaries. While misappropriated funds are used to finance immense salaries for administrators,⁴ student tuition has risen 318% since 2002.⁵ Student debt continues to be a serious issue, while faculty members have seen pay reductions, furloughs, and frozen salaries. With financial security looming over student and faculty lives, the current situation has done anything but produce a favorable learning environment. Students and faculty are forced to focus on irrelevant and distracting issues while the erosion of higher education takes place.

Finally, students and faculty members are alienated from each other. The competitiveness of higher learning, the distraction of extraneous issues, the elimination of free speech, and the lost sense of an academic community have distanced students from each other, and from other faculty members. Education as a commodity and as a use value in the world economic system reduces networks of support, mutual aid, and solidarity. Commonalities between student and professor are diminished, and manufactured discrepancies are accentuated and accepted. Moreover, as university budgets shrink, academic departments dwindle as well, therefore reducing available funding, faculty, and available classes. Additionally, the rebranding of activism, multiculturalism, and community engagement in the academy as ‘inappropriate’ and ‘indoctrinating’ distances the public from their sense of common goals and solidarity.⁶

Neither the academic nor the public community can afford to suffer the disintegration that is upon us. The alienation experienced from student to peer, and from student to mentor, is not just crippling to the university environment, but also to the larger general public. With no sense of

³ For more on this, see “The Parker Document,” cited above.
⁴ For information on the top paid executives, please visit http://www.calfac.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/CSU_SYS_all_fac.pdf
⁵ For more information on CSU financial statistics, please visit http://www.calstate.edu/bot/agendas/Aug11/CSURevenuesbyCampus.pdf
community, fellowship, and support, the totality of education is in crisis. Principles such as these enforce alienation among students and faculty, and contribute to the undermining of the university system. These principles are not only essential to human existence, but also are crucial to the underpinnings of higher education in the United States.

In order to counter the encroachment of alienation and the assault on public higher education, it is fundamental that the community stands in solidarity. It is essential that we remember our sense of connectedness, our common goals, and our shared dreams. We must resist the inequalities at hand, eliminate the imbalances of power, and strive to hold on to our sense of community. Education must be maintained and protected as a public good, and as a collective source of emancipation and liberation. Only through this process will students, faculty, and the community as a whole regain determination and agency over their futures, and over their education. Together, we stand to oppose the erasure of self-determination in higher education, and assert our rights as global citizens.