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Academic Freedom at Commuter Universities: Market Metaphors and the Public Interest

Clay Steinman

This is basically the speech I gave in 1988, without updates but with a few revisions for clarity. A printed version appeared in The Democratic Communiqué 7.5-6 (1989): 12-14. Since then, many of the general conditions described here have worsened, although thanks to years of heroic efforts by several key people since I left in 1989, the specific situation of critical media studies at FAU has improved. Meanwhile, joined by dedicated students and staff, faculty at many institutions continue to struggle to offer critical educational experiences essential to democracy, social justice, and lives bountifully informed. At Florida Atlantic University, this struggle has long found a home in the United Faculty of Florida (now a Florida Education Association/NEA/AFT/AFL-CIO affiliate), as it does elsewhere in faculty associations and unions—organizations that do indeed help make us strong. -

C.S., July 2012

When Ronald Reagan leaves office in January 1989, the United States will be much more unequal than it was at his inauguration in 1981. The rich have gotten richer and the poor, especially African Americans and Latinas/Latinos, have suffered as a result. Teaching at Florida Atlantic University since 1977, I lately hear more fear in the voices of students, most of whom seem to be middle- and lower-middle-class. I hear more apprehension about their futures. This follows a nationwide trend.

In this climate, capital and its allies in the universities have found it ever easier to persuade less affluent undergraduates to consider themselves students first of the job market, as employees-in-the-making. Still, in the classroom many of us view students in a more traditional sense, as people seeking stimulating mental lives, or preparing themselves for democratic citizenship, or for creative work. The clash of these drives makes academic freedom contested terrain. At stake are our students' educations, and ways they could enhance the culture.

At Florida Atlantic University most undergraduates have jobs and nearly all commute. Most major in business administration, engineering, or another explicitly vocational subject. At public, commuter universities such as FAU, administrators increasingly act as if the university teaches best when it emphasizes job training. They act as if we ought to sell credit hours as if they were tickets to financial security. They seem to think we should use public funds to pay what should be the private costs of training workers in job-specific skills.

In this process, what becomes marginalized is the teaching of ideas, of theory, of different ways of conceptualizing ourselves in the world, of asking questions about what is taken for granted, of thinking about what might be fair and just. Moreover, the attack on such work threatens academic freedom in ways we might not normally suspect. This pressure comes dressed as common sense, the common sense of the market as measure of what shall and shall not be legitimate within the university.

Marketplace imagery works against academic freedom in at least three ways: as driving force of the belief among students that higher education is (and should be) a work permit for a good job; as rationale for administrators to respond to what they perceive as demand in the student credit market by channeling support to programs that promise high productivity; and as justification for low academic salaries, particularly for fine arts and humanities professors in supposedly oversaturated job markets.

I. Students and the Job Market

We know that in the United States the ultimate occupations of college graduates are related to the admissions standards of the schools they attend. People from affluent families tend disproportionately to go to colleges like Amherst, Harvard, Princeton, and Smith. People who graduate from such schools tend disproportionately to get the best jobs. It should be no surprise, then, that the average Ivy League alumni family in 1986 had an income of more than \$120,000, more than four times that of the average U.S. household.

The expansion of U.S. higher education over the past 20 years, which made possible institutions such as FAU, was supposed to weaken if not break this link between class origin and individual achievement. Before FAU opened in the early 1960s, there was no public university in South Florida. A four-year education was available only to those who could afford the cost of tuition at a private university or the expense of residential study at a distant state university.

Most of the students I teach tell me they cannot afford either of these, especially with the ever-decreasing availability of financial aid. So they come to FAU, where even at its best educational quality is limited by scarce resources. Legislatures deny commuter schools the resources for faculty, libraries, dormitories, and other facilities provided to older, more selective state universities—resources supplied in abundance to the nation’s most selective private institutions. This is especially the case in Florida, where public higher education is notoriously underfunded.

What commuter schools do provide, however, is the promise of upward social mobility. Claims of vocational applicability pervade such schools’ publicity (One North Carolina college woos prospective students with billboards plastered, “Learn More, Earn More.”). This fits the popular notion that a college education from anywhere significantly enhances social mobility. But while it may be true that a degree does on average enhance lifetime income, much of this difference can be accounted for by the boost a four-year degree gives to students at elite schools. Evidence for significant economic mobility is difficult to find. Even with the expansion of public universities, wealth and income distributions have not changed

for the better since the early 1960s, and as I said at the outset, in the Age of Reagan they have become more skewed.

Ironically, it is the students themselves who seem the last to know this, especially in terms of their actual financial prospects. Michael Taves recently wrote that his students, “middle-class to poor . . . in a state college,” routinely expect to be earning \$45,000 to \$55,000 a year once they graduate and are set in their careers. Yet he reports that these same students lack the general academic skills necessary to reach the occupational levels that would conceivably earn that kind of money. But the students believe, and rare is the administrator (and unusual the faculty member) who would dissuade them. For as consumers, students want to think they can buy future security by paying what for them is costly tuition and expenses and putting in the required time. The last thing many want to hear from their professors is that few futures are secure, that an FAU diploma carries no money-back guarantee. Unfortunately, most students are unprepared to recognize that the glowing future implied in catalogs and course schedules is a false promise.

Fortunately, in my experience, most students are prepared to see the value of alternatives to vocationalism over the course of a semester, to investigate what constitutes independent learning, to look behind appearances, to understand the forces that shape their culture. Indeed, I owe the award that provides me this opportunity to speak to the open minds of my students.

But the minds of students are also open to those educators and politicians who reject the notion that teaching should raise fundamental questions. They say we rob students of job preparation they need. At the same time, in the more explicitly vocational fields such as business and engineering, accreditation pressures work to limit students’ educational options and hence the range of intellectual inquiry supported by the university.

II. Administrators and the Student Credit Market

As far as I can tell, most administrators are sensitive enough to traditional definitions of academic freedom that they do not openly interfere with what tenured faculty say in or out of the classroom. More difficult to fight are the actions of administrators who try to curtail our autonomy as they seek opportunities for enrollment growth.

Unlike their counterparts at elite universities, administrators at commuter schools show all too little concern for the quality of the general education their schools provide. They seem to accept the notion that their universities are not the ones charged with educating young people destined for leadership. Too often at commuter universities, students are treated as if they were destined for subordination, as if what they needed most was to learn to follow directions rather than to think for themselves. But that’s wrong. What students need most for professional—and personal—competence is to learn how to learn, to think, to solve abstract problems, to know what it means to be creative.

Recently, my own department, communication, has been under attack partly because we tend to be interested above all in helping students to be generally rather than vocationally

literate, a prerequisite for success by any standard. At the same time, we want students to be able to think for themselves about the media of communication as the consumers they definitely will be as well as the industry workers they might possibly become. But our approach has not been commercial enough for some administrators, who want the department to siphon off more students from the university's explicitly vocational programs. This, they say, could be done by changing what we teach and how we package it. But this would also provide poor service to our students, make poor use of our training, and make the university even less intellectually diverse than it already is.

For standing against this approach, we have been singled out and our resources and our time for research have been cut back. For example, courses in film studies that several of us have taught since we were hired, nonvocationalist courses with rental costs, for at least this year have been banned. Such cutbacks constitute harassment, in my view. They are part of an effort to make most of us in communication so unhappy with our situation at FAU that we will leave, even though according to established measures we tend to perform well in teaching, research, and service.

Cuts in resources and research time are announced not as political or educational but as economic decisions, however arbitrarily applied. In that sense, the attacks on our academic freedom do not come in forms that make them easily identifiable. At least to our faces, not once has the level of our work been questioned. Never has the specific content of our classes been criticized. No one has attacked our writings. As far as I can tell, our major offense continues to be our refusal to govern ourselves based on what others think of as market forces.

In Florida, state politicians seem most concerned with building an image of higher education accessibility. State bureaucrats seem to care most about pleasing politicians by keeping costs down and enrollments up. State and local corporate elites may speak out against declining general education, but they tend to lean on the schools only when the quality of work in their businesses is unsatisfactory.

For some administrators, visions of bulging student enrollments combine with perceptions of student vocationalism into a pseudo-democratic argument: We should offer students the curriculum that administrators believe students want and need. Never mind difficult questions of student preparedness for the increasingly complex demands of high-paying jobs. Never mind the specifics of the job market, which offers high-paying jobs only to a tiny minority of graduates. Never mind what the students could learn in order to be more interesting to themselves as well as to others, to participate effectively in public life, to be prepared generally for different kinds of difficult work.

III. Faculty Salaries and the Market

Finally, some administrators use the national marketplace to justify much lower salaries for humanities faculty, the lowest for the least vocational among us (philosophy, literature, and the fine arts). This devaluation of nonvocational discourses dispirits many of us, but, with the help of our union, the United Faculty of Florida, an affiliate of the National Education

Association, we have mobilized to file nearly forty grievances on the issue and to keep the matter before the public.

One result of this mobilization has been extensive discussion among faculty of the politics of salary differences between departments at the university. This is a major issue at FAU, because differences here are greater than they are nationally. At the same time, salaries in all fields at the university are too low to recruit and retain the faculty we need to do the job we should for the people of this area. In filing the grievances, our main consideration has been the gender politics of salaries, but a crucial element has been the relation between subject matter and compensation. We argued that the university's salary and reward structure, which tends to penalize nonvocational professors, constitutes an attack on academic freedom.

This attack will remain covert as long as the politicians and bureaucrats maintain a semblance of distance from corporate elites, and articulate an ideology of general public service. But to the extent that the public interest openly becomes a function of corporate interests, the attack will become normalized as sound administrative practice, and those who do not teach in the interest of capital will find their relative salaries dropping accordingly. The gap between private and public power is closing fast. Not only are corporate contributions increasingly tied to specific programs donors want, already universities in Florida and elsewhere plan branch classrooms specifically to serve individual businesses.

In this way, perceived short-run economic demands come to shape the mission of universities. Those whose work is not immediately practical become increasingly vulnerable. Terrifyingly, this attack on critical reason can appear as Reason itself. The teaching of tools, bits of instrumental knowledge, with no thought of their context, purpose, value, or cultural and environmental effects, becomes an act of social loyalty: It's what the students and the society need, given the competition.

Twenty-five years ago, Herbert Marcuse called this society "one-dimensional" because it squashes efforts to articulate alternative visions of how we might live on this earth. If we want a better world, higher education must be free to provide an environment in which students, staff, and faculty alike can assess the value what we do and explore ways we might act differently in a more humane and just social order.

Certainly, people need to be free to argue that we need more of a market society, not less, and that we need more inequality, not less, if this is to be a better world. But others must be as free to attack the idolatry of the market, to criticize efforts by students, faculty, and administrators to appease capital as if it were a god, sacrificing our academic freedom to meet its demands. We must be free to offer the very critique the market does not make: that the more human beings offer up to corporate power, the less they leave for their noncorporate selves. And we must be free to do this not just on special occasions such as this, but as a matter of routine.

It is easy to believe in academic freedom, indeed in any civil liberty, for people with whom one agrees. The test is whether one believes in academic freedom for one's intellectual adversaries. Although it is not widely known, the courts of the United States tend not to protect the academic freedom of individual faculty members; instead, they tend to see their

role as guardians of universities' freedom from government intrusion. And since U.S. universities tend to be hierarchically organized, in practice that means freedom for administrators and bureaucrats, not for the people in the classroom.

So guardianship of academic freedom must largely rest with those at the university who are not administrators--students and staff, surely, but foremost the faculty. If they are vigilant, they serve not only themselves but also their students and democratic possibilities for society at large. Outside the university, private interests tend to determine how we spend our time. Nowadays, most adults work outside the home, all too often performing tasks for others, tasks they neither design nor control; learning on the job tends to be learning to serve others. Every day, the average adult watches more than four hours of television, and you can bet that most of what is seen is designed neither to stimulate nor to provoke.

If time at the university is to be of a different sort, the market cannot be the measure of academic value. Shaping curricula according to imagined market demands leads only to menus of decaffeinated courses, 99.7 percent free of anything that might keep students awake at night, questioning their values or preconceptions. What William Shawn, long-time editor of *The New Yorker*, says about editing for the market applies to teaching for it as well. "The fallacy," according to Shawn, "is if you edit that way to give back the readers only what they think they want, you'll never give them something new they didn't know about." At their best, faculty are prepared to offer what is new, to provide students with a chance to learn what they do not already know, a chance to sort out values, to grow, to test ideas, to prepare for the challenge and responsibility of living in this difficult world, to combat fear with knowledge, insecurity with a sense of who and where and why we are.

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