

FORUM



Student-led demonstration, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, February 4, 2015. Overpass Light Brigade, Joe Brusky photographer. Source: [overpasslightbrigade.org/love-light-for-uw-fight-the-cuts/](http://overpasslightbrigade.org/love-light-for-uw-fight-the-cuts/).

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## Anthropologists in/of the neoliberal academy

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*Anthropologists in/of the Neoliberal Academy*

2016 | ANUAC. VOL. 5, N° 1, GIUGNO 2016: 41-90.

ISSN: 2239-625X – DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-2437



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## Graduate education and training in the neoliberal university

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay explores the impacts of neoliberal policies on graduate education, focusing attention on issues of curriculum, decision-making, and the role of graduate students at the university.

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Before beginning this essay, it is perhaps important to know who I am, or at least what role I fulfill at the university. I work in the Graduate School as a faculty member charged with enhancing our efforts at interdisciplinary and innovative education. In many ways, I am a perfect example of what neoliberalism has wrought. I am a mid-level administrator in a position that many might lump into the category of “administrative bloat”. I spend much of my time assisting faculty as they write proposals for new programs. This involves encouraging them to think about whom their new program will attract, how their new graduates will serve the workforce of the state and the nation, and what their economic impact will be. At the same time, I encourage them to become entrepreneurial; new programs are all but obliged to apply for training grants, to apply to foundations, or to otherwise secure the means to fund their graduate students.

I do not do those things because I think it will help these faculty better meet their pedagogical goals, but rather because it will help them get their programs approved and their graduate students fed. Demand, placement, and economic service to the state are what drives program approval decisions, so much more so than ideals of advancing science, lifting culture, pushing boundaries, and training insightful and critical thinkers; and, state funds for higher education, particularly graduate education, are never sufficient.

At the same time, I also have elements in common with the academic precariat. I am in a non-tenure-track faculty position, and my contract is reviewed and renewed on a year-to-year basis. In addition to not feeling I have the security to openly critique structures or policies I believe are problematic, the need to continually rejustify my existence forces me to carefully document the ways in which I contribute to the university, particularly in how I help increase our offerings, our training grants, and the quantity and quality of graduate students. This necessarily takes time and energy away from my ability to serve those students and to think creatively about training programs that advance knowledge and create passionate and curious people.

Much has been written on the impact on higher education of the policies and practices inspired by neoliberal ideologies and discourses. And much is quite damning (see for example, Giroux 2010). Cuts in state funding to public institutions, the extension of economic rationalities to universities, and the redefinition of individuals from citizens to economic actors has pushed universities to focus on revenue generation, economic efficiency, branding, and extrinsic outcomes (Saunders 2010). These conditions in turn have led to the undermining of tenure, the increased use of contingent faculty, and increasingly hierarchical modes of university governance (Saunders 2010).

What is missing from those accounts, though, is an on-the-ground view of their effects on faculty, students, and the institution. What I try to do here is to provide that and to focus attention a bit more on those issues that are specific to, or at least particularly relevant for, graduate education and training. This focus on graduate students is necessary because they face a different set of conditions, opportunities, and constraints than do undergraduates, and yet at many institutions, mine included, they lack visibility. This may manifest in subtle ways, such as graduate students being absent from the University President's annual letter bragging on the qualifications of new students, or they may be more insidious, particularly when important decisions are made without adequate representation from graduate student interests. Recent examples at my university include the selection and initial configuration of student information and other IT systems. When the needs of graduate students and their mentors are considered after key decision points, the workarounds put in place to meet their needs can be quite cumbersome. One might argue that the focus on undergraduates is natural, given that the university is made up mostly of undergraduates, but when approximately 8,500 of our 36,000 students are graduate and professional students, they are hardly insignificant. It seems more likely that they are often overlooked because roughly half of the approximately 7,000 graduate students are on assistantship, being *paid* to attend the university, rather than paying tuition. They are, therefore, not the same kind of consumer as the undergraduate who will pour tens of thousands of dollars into the university. Graduate students become the cogs in the machine, teaching courses and laboring in labs, with their work conditioned primarily as service to undergraduates and to PIs rather than as opportunities and contexts for their own growth and development as scholars.

Economic rationalities also drive a focus on creating graduate programs that are economically efficient, that generate revenue, and that provide for the needs of capital in the state. We see this in progressive rewrites of the program proposal template (provided by the Board of Regents of the University System) to increasingly focus on job prospects for graduates, revenue impacts to the university, and potential for economic impacts in the state. Faculty are now in the business of writing business plans, estimating market shares, and forecasting demand for their product every bit as much as they are tasked with designing programs to train future scholars and citizens. At the same

time, the University has been charged with eliminating programs that are “low producing” and that are feared to use too many resources in the production of each unit. This includes eliminating the terminal master’s degrees that in many fields have provided an honorable and useful escape hatch for those who learn that doctoral education is not a good fit. These are programs that cost very little, that we prefer not be high producing, that serve students well, and that were targeted for termination nonetheless. Luckily, the Board of Regents did accept the University’s argument that these programs should remain. Other programs will not be so lucky. As has been pointed out by others (e.g. Slaughter 1993), humanities programs have long been under fire because they do not generate revenue in the same way that genetics programs do, but now they are also under attack for being smaller programs, even when that is what might make both programmatic and financial sense.

Even such mundane building blocks of graduate education as courses are under pressure from the budget models born of neoliberalism. At my institution, budgets are loosely based on credit hours, and credit hours follow the instructor of the course, flowing to the unit that pays the instructor. This actively works against the development of interdisciplinary programs, as some unit heads discourage students from taking courses outside of their departments. This focus on credit hours also makes it difficult for faculty members to co-teach courses. Even when they give full effort, they can only receive a portion of the credit. Such a funding model encourages unnecessary duplication of effort. Why would we develop a robust general training course that would serve multiple programs when each program could offer a variant of it and capture the credit hours produced by their students?

For those who write using the term neoliberalism, the results attributed to it are almost always cast as universally bad. I would like to, gently, challenge that notion. Many authors decry the “vocationalization” of training (e.g. Giroux 2010), and while I do believe that our graduate programs should focus more on creativity and inquiry, I also think it is perfectly reasonable and responsible to train students with other skills as well. Turning out graduates who can communicate and work in teams certainly serves the interests of capital, but that does not mean it does not also serve the interests of the students and society more broadly. As pertains to the research enterprise, perhaps the constant push for more grant dollars has forced creativity leading to breakthroughs in science. And perhaps the arranged marriage of arts and humanities programs with the sciences will not simply produce bland humanities in the service of STEM but rather confer benefits in expanding the horizons of both partners.

I feel acutely the tension between my roles as handmaiden of neoliberalism and critical scholar committed to the democratization of knowledge production, management, and transfer. I have not yet found a satisfactory way to resolve that tension and am not entirely content with the “change from within” model. However, a glimmer of hope came from a very unlikely place earlier this year, as International Monetary Fund

(IMF) researchers identified disturbing concerns with neoliberalism more generally (Ostry, Loungani, Furceri 2016). If even the IMF can step away from neoliberal policies, perhaps our institutions of higher education can as well.

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