

BOOK REVIEW

Academia for sale?

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University, Inc: The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education. By Jennifer Washburn. Basic Books, 2005, 326 pp., \$26.00.

This stunning study of how the commercial ethos in universities has subverted the values of humanism and the public good is a chilling heads-up for anyone involved in higher education. Jennifer Washburn has accumulated an alarming amount of information about the consequences of the intrusion of the market into research universities. Not only are academic activities skewed in the interest of profit, but the public at large is also cheated and sometimes harmed.

Washburn's chief focus is to show how the corporate stranglehold on academic science, particularly in medicine, pharmacology and biotechnology, has sacrificed basic research and even integrity to industry's short-term bottom line. Here are some of her examples:

- In the 1990s, the tobacco industry paid academic scientists up to \$20,000 each to publicly downplay the risks of smoking.

- The Enron Corporation financed the Harvard Electricity Policy Group, which wrote 31 reports promoting deregulation of California's energy markets.

- At Brown University, Microfibres Inc. tried to prevent Dr. David Kern from publishing his findings on a potentially fatal new lung disease that affected workers at its factory. Microfibres was being asked to donate to a new project for Brown Medical School, and the Brown administration told Kern not to publish or present his work. After protest, Brown backed off and Kern presented his results at a conference – but a few days later, his position at Brown was eliminated.

- Also at Brown, it was revealed that Dr. Martin Keller, lead author of a study endorsing the safety and effectiveness of the antidepressant Paxil, was paid over half a million dollars in a single year in consulting fees from drug companies. One of the companies was the maker of Paxil, later identified as potentially inducing suicide among teenagers.

NOVARTIS GETS A VOTE

Increasingly, corporate influence goes beyond exerting pressure from the outside. Novartis, the Swiss-based multinational pharmaceutical company and producer of genetically engineered crops, signed an agreement in 1998 with the University of California at Berkeley to fund research in its Department of Plant and Microbial Biology. In return, Novartis got the first right to negotiate licenses on one-third of the discoveries, whether funded by its donations or by taxpayers' money. Novartis also got two of five seats on the departmental committee that determined how the money would be spent; the three university appointees all received large research awards from the firm. An external review by a team from Michigan State University concluded that such agreements should not be repeated because they created conflicts of interest for the university as an institution.

Such concerns were amplified when a leading opponent of the Novartis deal was

denied tenure at Berkeley. He had published research indicating that genetically modified corn had contaminated native maize in Mexico; his department had recommended him for tenure by a vote of 32-1.

Despite this and other corporate bullying at UC campuses, Governor Gray Davis pushed for UC to increase its collaboration with industry, with the creation of the California Institutes for Science and Innovation. Davis offered \$100 million a year in public funds to each of four new UC institutes, contingent on each raising twice that much from other sources. The goal of this public/private project is commercialization of discoveries through the academic integration of venture-capital management and business incubators, with industrial parks intertwined with university research facilities.

PUBLIC FUNDING IS CUT

"When these expensive commercial-research centers were being launched," Washburn writes, "state spending on the UC system declined by 14 percent, even as enrollment climbed 18 percent."

Washburn knows that university-based research in the US has often tended toward utility, originally through land grants for agricultural colleges and later for war-related research. But, she argues that 1980 legislation, the University Small Business Patent Procedures Act, or Bayh-Dole Act, which permitted universities to patent and license

federally sponsored (taxpayer-financed) research on a large scale, has led to a new paradigm, a "market-model university," that increasingly puts short-term profit ahead of humanistic education and basic research.

The more public universities are starved of public funds, the more they will find private resources tempting. But the intellectual and moral costs are high. Secrecy has enclosed the scientific commons. Intellectual property battles have led to charges of stealing research and the abuse of junior scien-

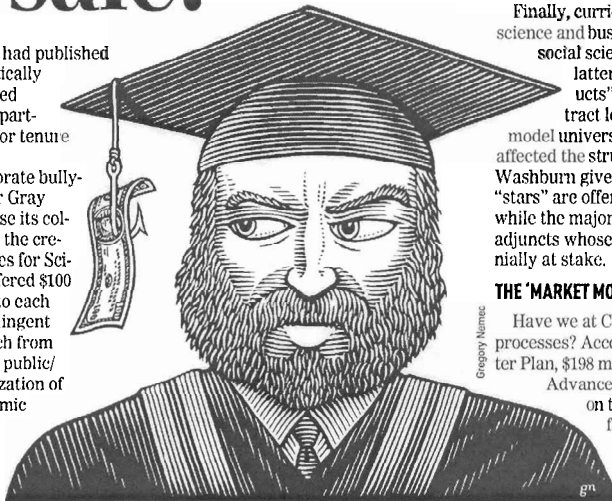
tists and students. Distorted research results injure the general public and create distrust of university work.

Finally, curricula are distorted to favor science and business, while humanities and social sciences wither. In general, the latter fields have fewer "products" to market and therefore attract less funding in a "market-model university." This model has already affected the structure of the professoriate. Washburn gives NYU as an example, where "stars" are offered salaries in six figures, while the majority of classes are taught by adjuncts whose academic freedom is perennially at stake.

THE 'MARKET MODEL'

Have we at CUNY been affected by these processes? According to the 2004–2008 Master Plan, \$198 million will go to building an Advanced Science Research Center on the City College campus. Its focus is to be biosensing, technologies that can be used for the identification, monitoring, and/or control of biologic phenomena. While this has some medical uses, expected external collaborators include Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman and IBM. Some of us ought to do some Washburn-type research about all that.

Editor's note: Jennifer Washburn will be the featured speaker at the April 22 UFS conference, "Recapturing the 'Public' in Public Higher Education," 9:30 - 3:00 at the CUNY Graduate Center. To register, call 212-794-5538 or e-mail Vernice.Blanchard@mail.cuny.edu.



Gregory Name

Corporate influence is growing.