

**The Spread of Neoliberalism in US Community Colleges: TQM Accreditation,  
“Consumers,” and Corporate Sponsored Non-Profits**

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**Abstract:**

This article examines the extent of neoliberalism's influence within US community colleges during the last decade. It argues that such influence is changing non-profit, publicly funded community colleges into consumer colleges, serving the needs of corporations and “customers” at the expense of civic responsibility. Educating 46% of all United States undergraduate students, 2-year community colleges have historically been “the people’s college” educating citizens and university transfer students while simultaneously serving a community’s need for vocational training. Evidence of the spread of neoliberal ideology includes the adoption of accreditation mechanisms based on Total Quality Management and Continuous Improvement models derived from industry; the evolution of discourse in public institutions equating students as customers; and non-profit educational associations, funded by multinational technology companies that manipulate and influence educational reforms. This article is an attempt to illuminate the conscious and unconscious intertwining of public, non-profit, and for profit systems and discourses that have lead to the continued commodification of an essential public service.

## Introduction

Community colleges in the US were founded at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to provide the first two years of a university education. These local colleges later developed into broad educational institutions with strong vocational and liberal arts traditions. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, in 2008, 46 percent of all United States undergraduate students were enrolled in 1,195 community colleges, 987 funded with public revenue, for a total enrollment of 11.6 million students. During this time, these community institutions increasingly adopted and promoted neoliberal paradigms and values that continue to threaten the historical responsibility of the public community college to be the “people’s college” as Walter Eells (1931, p.159) described them at their inception. This turning toward the market began in earnest in 1957 with President Eisenhower’s “Committee on Education Beyond the High School,” chaired by Devereux Josephs, a Wall Street lawyer and head of the New York Life Insurance Company. That committee marked a change in who would be advising the public on education, as the president looked to business leaders for advice and to models for action and change derived from the business community. At that time “few of the committee’s members and staff, who were primarily conservative businessmen and university leaders, had any real expertise or interest in community colleges and their recommendations were often contradictory and disturbing to community college leaders” (Witt, 1995, p.134).

This paradigm shift that began in the late 1950s gained strength in the mid-1980s when total quality management systems were introduced into industry (Houston, 2007) and the word “outcome” started to become the means to “knowledge” in institutions of higher education (Spady, 1994). The crossover of models and attitudes from industry to educational institutions included both treating students as customers and imposing industrial paradigms of measuring production outputs on classes and faculty in an attempt to standardize, homogenize, and control a perceived measurable output of learning across all disciplines (Houston, 2007; Spring, 2006). Corresponding with a growing enrollment in community colleges during the last 20 years, is the perception of their function as service providers to corporate America; educating a work force which is both producer and consumer (Levin, 2005). This was the effect of an emerging ideology in which “Neo-liberals pursue and defend the freedoms, not of individuals, but of an already enormously powerful business sector” (Bonnett, 2004, p.135), and presidents and

*Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, vol.9. no.1

administrators from community colleges actively engaged in a pullback “from the community, from noncorporate service” (Levin, 2002, p.121).

During this time, in addition to embracing corporate service, public education embraced the replacement of the referents “public” and “community” with “consumer.” This was positively endorsed by Margaret Spellings, US Secretary of Education under George W. Bush, who said that recommendations by the Commission on the Future of Higher Education regarding student tracking through the system of higher education was “to have better understanding about higher education in America as a consumer good” (Field, 2006). This was followed by a September 26, 2006 press release from Spellings with a headline that was succinct and to the point with regard to who higher education serves: “Secretary Spellings Announces Plans for More Affordable, Accessible, Accountable and Consumer-Friendly US Higher Education System.”

These are just a few signs of movement away from the early traditions of the community college that present a threat to the future of a republic that should embrace basic and wide spread educational opportunities as a civic and global responsibility, not as a consumption and market activity. As the Obama administration continues many of the policies put into place by the preceding administration, and the US economy consumes its way into debt, there is an ever increasing need to work toward creating a balance in community colleges between the influence of corporate models, adapted for making education a product to be consumed, and the historical responsibility of community colleges to educate the members of local communities in vocational and liberal arts disciplines. To paraphrase Nussbaum (2000, p.9), education is a national responsibility to cultivate the whole human being for the functions of citizenship and life generally.

Given that almost half of undergraduate students in America attend community colleges, this paper looks back to the first decade of the 21st century and the spread of neoliberal ideology and paradigms in public non-profit community colleges. It is an attempt to illuminate the conscious and unconscious intertwining of public, non-profit, and for profit systems and discourses that have lead to the continued commodification of an essential public service. In particular this article looks at the adoption of neoliberal ideology and market models in accreditation, the

further entrenchment and re-signification of the student as customer, and the role of non-profit educational associations funded by technology corporations that influence both pedagogy and process in community colleges.

### **Neoliberal Accreditation**

The adaptation of market models to public education is one result of the creep of neoliberalism into the ethical encoding of many Americans, in which education is seen as continually negotiable and pliable to the needs of those corporations and individuals who ring college campuses. Though the term “neoliberalism” is increasingly contested and its use at times problematic (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009), in this article the term is used to represent an ethic and ideology as described by Harvey (2005, p.3):

In so far as neoliberalism values market exchange as ‘an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs’, it emphasizes the significance of contractual relations in the marketplace. It holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market.

This urge to treat all institutions, from government to education, whether profit driven or not, as market like structures providing services subject to market based competition with the goal of financial profit, has been steadily gaining common sense credibility:

Under the rule of neoliberalism, politics are market driven and the claims of democratic citizenship are subordinated to market values. What becomes troubling under such circumstances is not simply that ideas associated with freedom and agency are defined through the prevailing ideology and principles of the market, but that neoliberalism wraps itself in what appears to be an unassailable appeal to common sense (Giroux, 2002, p.428).

It is this notion of common sense, combined with the inability to critically evaluate one’s own position within an existing paradigm, that allows incompatible models to be utilized in institutional accreditation, discursive boundaries of language to be blurred, and non-profit organizations to do the bidding of corporate contributors in the name of public good. Many US community colleges have provided a fertile field for the growth and confluence of these forces,

*Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, vol.9. no.1

driven by a neoliberal ideology, nurturing administrators and processes that prioritize workforce development along with globalization and economic stimulus (Mendoza, et al., 2009).

The use of “outcome” based education models and “continuous quality improvement” systems in non-profit community colleges around the United States, are two examples of the common sense utilization of market systems within a non-market entity. Outcome based education does not seek to measure student success by grades or the number of courses taken, but by students’ ability to attain certain measurable and demonstrable outcomes of which it is the facilitator’s (formerly “teacher’s”) responsibility to see that the customer (formerly “student”) achieves. Much of this theory, developed in part by William Spady (1995, p.82) in the 1990’s, focuses on “the end product of a clearly defined process that students carry out” that is applicable in the real world.

During the last ten years, adopting outcome based and continuous improvement assessment models became necessary for some community colleges to maintain accreditation. These assessment models were derived from the total quality management systems (TQMS) used in the manufacturing industry. According to the U.S. Department of Higher Education (2010) there are 18 regional and national accrediting agencies in the United States. All of them now use some form of peer review assessment that leads to continuous improvement (New England Association of Schools and Colleges, 2010). The example I will use here is the accreditation program promoted by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools led during the last decade by executive director Steven D. Crow (2001, p.6), who considered higher education a “multi billion dollar business.” The Higher Learning Commission accredits over 200 universities and community colleges and has been one of the most aggressive about using continuous improvement in the accreditation process. The commission’s accreditation program is called the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) adapted from TQMS and corporate continuous improvement models. It is a program designed to treat colleges and universities as if they are manufacturers of educated consumers with clearly measurable manufacturing processes, and that through continuous evaluation, improvement in production goals and methods can be modified for a more controlled and accountable output.

During these same years, Giroux (2002, p.427-428) argued that the use and infiltration of corporate paradigms in higher education was disintegrating the public space necessary for a thriving democracy. But it was Bonnet (2004, p.141) who summed up the eroding influence of neoliberalism on civic responsibilities demanded by a democracy while hinting at the discourse warping power of neoliberalism practiced in non-profit institutions. He writes that Neoliberalism “is indicative of the political character of contemporary Westernisation: it *pursues* liberalisation but merely acknowledges democracy. The former is the active partner, the passion, the latter a hollow duty. Thus we are left with democracy as neo-liberals would like it, not market forces as democrats would like them.” In 2001, when the Higher Learning Commission's cheer-leading for AQIP as an accreditation model was in crescendo, Steven Crow's stated goals for the colleges under the commission's control sought to break down the boundaries separating the public citizen from the public consumer in the name of freedom and liberal market ideology. In a speech given in 2001 he uses the language of market manipulation that implies an increased individual freedom while simultaneously, and paradoxically, subjecting the public individual to the tenets of a neoliberal ideology.

Crow's speech is designed to appeal to an American common sense: entrepreneurialism and market responsiveness are the natural order of things and can be applied to public education, regardless that the goals of a public non-profit educational institution and the goals of an entrepreneur are markedly different. But Crow's statement also appeals to the desires of educators to put students first, to offer more programs in conjunction with local communities, and to maintain academic freedom. He creates a perception, by embedding neoliberal principles in a perceived democratic language, that adoption of these paradigms in education is forward thinking, a result of common sense, is good for students, is good for the community, and an inevitable and proper development. But the perception may be different from the reality.

In his speech Crow (2001, p.8) claims that there is a “new culture emerging within higher education.” The implication is that what he is describing is developed from ‘within’ the institutions, which is inaccurate, but it provides the listener with an immediate sense of self righteousness, a sort of “yes, we started this” feeling, when in fact the principles he continues to outline in the speech were derived from a consumer driven, free market paradigm, applied

extensively beyond the institutions the Higher Learning Commission accredits. According to Crow (2001, p.8), in this “new” culture the “learning of students is central,” an implication that in the existing system the learning of students is not central, but in the future it will be. He then appeals to the mythic, horizontal structure of a democratic America, that hierarchies are bad and need to be eliminated, and suggests replacing them instead with “collaborative team work,” which is not only inherently good, but our democratic duty and the right tool for the job (Crow, 2001, p. 8). In the end, the consequence of eliminating hierarchies and introducing a system of team work is that it will give decision making and organizational power to all, rather than leaving it with just a few. Ironically, these very proposals Crow is advocating require imposition and indoctrination from somewhere on high and outside the college or university. In this case, the Higher Learning Commission, under Crow's directorship, is responsible for granting accreditation and enforcing the framework within which it can be achieved, undermining his claim of horizontal power sharing. In short, it is an example of “the perceived power of management to impose control from above by deluding workers into thinking that this power now emanates from their own actions” (Edler, 2004, p.99).

Continuing with this example, Crow (2001, p.8) states that he wants to blur institutional boundaries through cooperation to provide better service to students, an allusion to a characteristic of globalization. Though there is significant debate regarding the term in higher education (Dodds, 2008), it is generally agreed that globalization requires the blurring of boundaries outside a corporation, such as the removal of trade barriers, as a goal because it provides the corporation with the opportunity to sell more goods and services with fewer restrictions. This increases access to markets and competition, and, if the theory holds, provides better services to the consumer. Crow's statement, regarding better services to students, rests on two assumptions. The first is that students are buying a service which can be tangibly measured and improved through a free market system. The second is that the blurring of boundaries between educational institutions and the market is in the public's best interest and not just the interest of the many corporations that rely on these institutions for the education and instruction of workers who will then take their positions as consumers in the consumer cycle.



Lastly, Crow (2001, p.8) states: “Many of you in the audience are part of this new culture while others will come to understand it through training and through experiencing it on site visits.” This is the language of indoctrination; a facilitator stating that many are part of this “new” culture and others will come to understand it after having been inducted through on-site seminars and training. Thus, in conclusion, through such training, thinking becomes homogeneous and educators can embrace academic freedom within this bland homogeneousness, which stifles diversity or dissent, thus becoming servants to the institution under the illusion that they empower the institution. It is a simple idea but with an important flaw:

Colleges and universities are organizations like corporations and, the thinking goes, if business improvement methods work for corporations, they should also work for higher education. After all, teaching and learning is a product and, like other products, it is sold to consumers. The problem, however, is that although educational institutions are corporation-like entities, their primary activity is teaching and learning—which itself is not a business activity. The education process can be defined in numerous ways, but however one defines it, teaching and learning does not inherently involve the activity of buying and selling. (Edler, 2004, p.93)

Community colleges around the United States are educating 11.6 million people (AACC, 2010) and they must be recognized for the power they wield in determining the educational values and priorities of the republic. In part, these values are reflected in community college mission statements which have become increasingly infected with neoliberal ideology emphasizing the role of the community college in the market and the learner as an “economic entity” (Ayers, 2005, p.539). In contrast, Eells's early sentiment of the community college as “the people's college” is one that captures the possibilities of the two year college as a tertiary level of education across the United States, funded by public money and educating all who embrace the opportunity to learn for whatever path they choose. This was a system which evolved to give access to vocational training, life long learning, liberal arts education, and university transfer programs; a system with virtually no admissions requirements and with low tuition. In short, the community college was evolving for the first 60 years into a “people’s college,” not a corporation’s college.

*Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, vol.9. no.1

However, the vision that Crow (2001, pp.6-7) sees for the institutions his association accredits is one that includes suppliant service to corporations, providing “entry-level credentials” for workers. The path to legitimizing these credentials in the eyes of corporations is to use corporate paradigms for evaluation and accreditation in public higher education. These paradigms have gained such a common sense appeal that it has been difficult to create an awareness of possible alternatives, or an awareness that our institutional systems may be sending a stronger message about values (by adapting certain business models) than students find through their studies in the classroom. As Bonnet (2004, pp.139-140) wrote about neoliberalism: “When a pattern of domination becomes so extensive as to be accepted as part of everyday life, something curious happens. It disappears. More precisely, it becomes a natural, common sense, aspect of existence and, as such, unworthy of notice or comment.” And even if some faculty feign interest in understanding this paradigm shift it becomes even more difficult to persuade them, and many administrators, that this may not be the best system for public community education. On this point Bok (2003, p.172) argues:

Not all education takes place in classrooms. Intentionally or not, the actions and policies of campus officials carry messages to the university community about which values truly count and which are expendable. At times, these messages can be more powerful than any formal classroom lecture in setting examples that show what the institution truly stands for and what principles really matter.

The principles that have come to matter for many community colleges during the last ten years include treating education as a consumer product, accrediting institutions with the prevailing corporate evaluation trend, evaluating faculty by customer satisfaction, and replacing students with customers.

### **The Paradigm Consumes the Student**

What institutions are practicing more and more is entrepreneurial in nature, treating education, whether vocational or transfer, as a product to be bought, sold and measured, serving an entrepreneurial customer (Roueche, 2005; Levin, 2005). These are the values public community colleges are starting to project because of the pragmatic and common sense perceptions of such values. But such entrepreneurial practices may lead to the tyranny of the market, enveloping

education within the same freedom restricting cycle of marketing, selling, buying, and demanding as tangible products and entertainment products of popular culture, where no objection or voice from beyond the cycle can be heard or even considered. This is in part because of the perception of neoliberalism as pragmatic; it is “what works” (Bonnet, 2004, p. 131).

But public not for profit community colleges in the U.S. should not be selling education, and the faculty, administration, and community should not support such a system. Yet all are complicit: The community because of consumerism, living life as a business with earning money as the goal, and a disposable culture, of all entertainment all the time telling us where and how to spend our money. College administrations support this system because the accrediting agencies and boards are dominated by corporate minded representatives, and some faculty have felt pressure to market themselves to conform their interests, the content of their courses, and their teaching practices to the demand of the market (Edmundson, 2004).

Ours may be an “age of indulgence” where a “sense of entitlement is inbred” (Kindlon 2001, p.164) and a group of classroom trends, such as grade inflation, lack of student responsibility, and high absenteeism may be consequences of this entitlement/indulgence dualism (Lippmann, et al., 2009). Grade inflation, for example, has been a well documented problem at elite private universities, where “the customers have high expectations—and high tuition bills” (Seligman, 2002, p.94). It has been suggested that grade inflation in public institutions “is a direct consequence of seeing students as customers entitled to a product (credits) that they have paid for, rather than as apprentices, and the result is a weakening of standards and a skewing of instructor and student accountability” (Hassel, et al., 2005, p.4). Even with regard to student absenteeism, if the student “understands the purposes of education in metaphors of currency,” then given that they have paid for class “they should be able to decide whether to go or not” (Hassel, et al., 2005, p. 5). In the same study, Hassel, et al. (2005, p.4) also argued that the student’s responsibility to attend class is diluted by the “proliferation of independent study, flextime, and online courses.” Catering to student demands, “the presence of a teacher and the classroom interaction that had been the hallmark of traditional higher education are seen as barriers to be overcome, not as integral components” (Hassel, et al., 2005, p.4).

Catering to student demands is seen as catering to customer demands. Since the 1980s, educational institutions, journals, and government reports have participated in a progression of the metaphor: student as customer. Gradually appropriating some categorical meanings, while shedding others, the usage has evolved from “the student is like a customer,” to “the student is a customer,” to just “customer,” a transition of terms from one particular to education, to one of the market. For these same decades many have argued that treating students as customers is inaccurate, flawed and detrimental to public education, yet the use of the word “customer” seems to have a viral persistence.

For almost 20 years there have been academics, teachers, administrators, and even industrial Total Quality Management specialists that have argued students are not customers and the use of the metaphor is misleading and dangerous. Why does referring to students as customers present a danger? In short, the “metaphor suggests undue distance between the student and the educational process; highlights the promotional activities of professors and promotes the entertainment model of classroom learning; inappropriately compartmentalizes the educational experience as a product rather than a process; and reinforces individualism at the expense of community” (McMillan, et al., 1996, p.1).

With regards to this simple comparison, and the neoliberal paradigm shift, Margaret Spellings, as mentioned earlier, contends public education is a consumer product. If education is a consumer product, then there must be a customer. But if the customer is the one who pays for the service, then in community colleges, where the predominance of funding is still based on tax revenues, it is the tax payer who is the customer, not the student. In some cases, when using market terms, faculty even considered students “products” and not customers (Obermiller, 2005). Regardless, the persistence of the comparison, and in particular the use of customer and student as synonyms, serves a neoliberal ideology intent on dissolving boundaries and extending the tentacles of the market into public non-profit educational institutions. To attain this dissolution, inaccurate comparisons are encouraged, creating an evolution of meaning and shift in the basic narratives, missions, and assumptions within the existing discourse of public education. The discourse of public education is incompatible with the more powerful profit oriented goals of the market,

causing the market to seek the dissolution of boundaries separating the discourses and completing the hegemony of the neoliberal discourse; a phenomenon that is active in the mission statements of many community colleges (Ayers, 2005).

But when we talk about customers in public education who are we even talking about? One would presume the student, based on the use of the simile, but a former President of Northwest Missouri State University, Dean Hubbard (Hoffman & Kretovics, 2004, p.106), wrote in 1993, “we concluded that in the classroom, the student, along with the instructor, as ‘suppliers’ producing a ‘product’ (knowledge) that a future ‘customer’ (employer or graduate school) will evaluate.” For Hubbard (Hoffman & Kretovics, 2004, p. 106), the customer is the employer or graduate school, but it may also be the “local education authorities” or “validating bodies,” including parents, alumni, and employers.

Even within corporations and industry criticism of the comparison can be found. Quentin Scrabec (2000, p.298), an industrial quality manager for 25 years wrote that “students are not customers; they are recipients. Yes, students pay for service, but the customer analogy stops there. In a business setting, a customer is more than a purchaser because the customer defines the requirements for a quality product or service. Allowing students to set education specifications would degrade the very service being sold.” With 95% of degree seeking students in public non-profit institutions in 2001, giving the customer what they want, regardless of how the term is defined, may not be good higher education policy (Pusserl & Doane, 2001).

In short, students are not like customers for the following reasons: students at public institutions do not pay the full price of their education, it is subsidized by the tax payers; students do not have choice, they are selected for schools or have to fulfill basic requirements to enter; students are required to maintain certain standards beyond payment of bills, such as GPA, course completions etc.; students are not knowledgeable about the courses they take, students do not understand what it takes to become a degree holder; paying tuition does not entitle them to a grade or a degree; society has expectations of graduates that it does not have of customers, such as competencies (think doctor or engineer) or contributions; and students are not always right.

*Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, vol.9. no.1

But many students, especially in the “Net Generation” as it has been called (Oblinger, 2005), think of themselves as customers and expect to be taught and entertained, not to learn. Many expect the technology and electronic devices that they have used as toys for entertainment and diversion since they were kids to be incorporated into the learning process. Convinced, as maybe we all are, in the illusion of a digital immortality, how do they come to know what they want? Schwartzman (1995, p.219) writes:

A student’s immediate desires often consist of very short-term and self-serving goals: to pass a course, to graduate, to learn concepts and techniques whose immediate applicability to employment are manifest...Catering only to what the students want at the moment presumes that in their expression of desires, students are fully informed and can express their desires unequivocally.

Students are morphing into customers and consumers in community college classrooms because society at large no longer sees the language of the market as incompatible with any element of life. Students in the US may not be aware that there should be spheres of our communities that are immune from the profit motive or commodification; designed to instruct without market prejudice (public schools); or protect those who cannot protect themselves (law and government). What is of value in learning, life, and the classroom may not be what is valuable in the market, nor is it necessary to distribute, or systematize that learning in the same way. Edmundson (2004, p.9) writes: “We Americans live in a consumer culture, and it does not stop short at the university’s walls. University culture, like American culture at large, is ever more devoted to consumption and entertainment, to the using and using up of goods and images.”

If students who make up the “Net Generation” demand alternative delivery formats, more technology in the classrooms, and flexible learning modes, on what basis have they determined that these demands are necessary for the educational process? The answer may be in the word “process” (or media and means), as institutes of higher education become more entwined with globalization contributing to the production of technology and the knowledge production that goes along with it (Dodds, 2008). Increasingly, industry seeks to interact with institutes of higher education on the development of new processes, thus privileging knowledge of processes over

contemplation of knowledge itself because knowledge of processes leads to an ever increasing demand for the consumption of means to engage those processes.

This appetite for consumption is transforming some public institutions from community colleges to consumer colleges, moving beyond the metaphorical allusion to the displacement of language particular to the discourse of public education with language and systems of the market. In spite of strong arguments and evidence of the problems of treating public education as a commodity, referring to students as customers has reached widespread acceptance among academics, teachers, staff, and administrators of educational institutions. If the adoption of market terms and processes function as a paradigm for all processes and as a guide for living, then what chance is there to change it in higher education?

Davies, et al. (2005) argued that it may not be possible for us to extricate ourselves from the neoliberal tentacles in our institutions, even if we realize and understand the extent of their reach. The nature of neoliberalism, in creating an illusion of common sense and trapping us in the system, is that it veils or eliminates alternatives and oftentimes even the will to consider them. But Archer (2008, pp.272-273) took a very close look at identities of younger academics and teachers in higher education, using lengthy written responses of the participants in her study, and argued that they criticized the obsession with ‘counting’; the managerial approach to decision making; the narrow forms of accepted output; the dominance of the auditing and business model; the “macho” competitive ethos; and the suppression of critical thinking. Though the research for Archer’s study was derived from higher education in the UK, the study is representative of the issues that affect some community college faculty across the US and Canada with the additional concern in north America of the role of faculty as revenue generators (Levin, 2007). Perhaps ironically, community college faculty are just as likely to be promoters of neoliberal ideology on their campuses without the intention to do so, particularly with regard to the adoption of new instructional technologies (Levin, 2007). Such observations provoke the question of how faculty and administrators learn of these new technologies and their value or benefit for community colleges.

### **Global Corporations and “Educational” Non-profits Pull the Strings**

*Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, vol.9. no.1

It may be difficult to change a neoliberal ethic that most people are not even aware they are practicing, but it is imperative that there is persistent questioning of neoliberal values and the comparisons it engenders, such as students are like customers, even though much of the education community has moved on to accept the equivalence, student equals customer, and the paradigm shift that it portends. This shift and its influence on community colleges is driven by trends in liberal market globalization, of which popular culture is a prime commodity. Pressured by industry, cuts in funding, and exclamations that former institutional structures and traditions will have no place in the future marketplace, some college presidents have moved ever closer to corporate managerial styles to wrestle with an output that is expected by the individual entrepreneurs who enroll in classes, and the corporate entrepreneurs that will employ them (Levin, 2007).

Validation of this process has taken significant root in movements dedicated to “advance higher education through the intelligent use of information technology” to quote the slogan of the non-profit organization Educause. This non-profit organization publishes free online academic resources, including a book entitled, *Educating the Net Generation* (2005). This book is an advertisement for the technology industry in the guise of a manifesto for change in colleges and universities. Academically written, note the “edu” suffix of the Educause website (2010), the book cites students and studies to support its argument that:

The growing impact of technology is evident in higher education. Technological change, and changes driven by the Net Generation, challenge—some would say threaten—higher education to assimilate the resulting roles, rules, and relationships in a new academy. That new academy must grow out of a traditional campus context that has successfully resisted such intrusions in the past. (Oblinger, 2005, p.14.1)

The book even goes so far as to claim “unrest in the classroom” as young people who are “empowered to create knowledge, not merely absorb it” challenge convictions and processes in higher education (Oblinger, 2005, p.14.2).

The Educause website (2010) shows affiliations with approximately 64 associations and accrediting agencies including the American Association of Community Colleges. But what is



disturbing about Educause is its membership list: several hundred of the most powerful and influential technology companies in America including 5G Wireless, Adobe, Apple, Blackboard, Dell, eCollege, Epson, Follett, Gateway, HP, IBM, Microsoft, and Toshiba. Students and the community are sold more and more technological devices for use in their personal lives, and there is a corresponding increase in the expectation for the use of technology in their education (Oblinger, n.d.). This expectation is well documented by Educause, with literally thousands of online articles containing research that documents the integration of technology in the lives of the net generation (even claiming that they no longer think of it as technology) and how technology can be used in higher education (Oblinger, n.d.). Colleges, including administrators and faculty, have been somewhat resistant or slow to adopt new technologies, so this non-profit organization, backed by the manufacturers of technological devices lobbies institutions, faculty, and accrediting agencies to make process and technology more central in academic institutions. To appeal to administration and faculty, this promotion of the donors' marketing agenda is done in part with extensive opportunities for professional development as well as the *Educause Review*, its online magazine, and the *Educause Quarterly*, a peer-reviewed journal. Both venues serve to support, with research and commentary, the increasing necessity of technology and market values in educational institutions.

Similar to the Oblinger's book, the much touted 1997 book *A Learning College for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, written by Terry O'Banion, is a neoliberal Bible for turning public, non-profit community colleges into chaotic, inefficient, managerial driven companies. O'Banion (1997, pp.38-39) writes:

Arrayed against these constituents ["education bureaucrats, the faculty, the administrators and support staff, and the students and their parents"], however, will be the leaders of business and industry, large and small, who insist on and will only support a system of higher education that produces students with the kinds of skills their companies need to remain competitive in the global economy...It is the business leaders of this country who will confront the academy and prevail.

O'Banion supports the conclusions of a Clinton era 1994 Education Commission report entitled "A Model for the Reinvented Higher Education System: State Policy and College Learning,"

*Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, vol.9. no.1

which recommended an “enterprise model” for education which focuses on the customer rather than the learner (O’Banion 1997 p. 20). In his commentary O’Banion (1997, p.20) merges the student and the customer together by defending the report’s use of the word “customer” in place of student, and then claiming the “in the enterprise model, the student is clearly first.” O’Banion is wrong, of course, in such a model the *customer* is first, not the student.

Terry O’Banion founded the League for Innovation in the Community College in 1968, a non-profit corporation funded by many of the same technology companies that fund Educause. According to the League’s website (2010), over 800 institutions are members of The League and nine members of The League’s board of directors have been president of the American Association of Community Colleges. None of this cross pollination suggests any malfeasance, but it does suggest a congregation around an ethic that supports an integration of the paradigms and values of the marketplace in areas of society that have traditionally been less entrepreneurial in nature. The League’s “About Us” web page (2010) claims that it “is the leading community college organization in the application of information technology to improve teaching and learning, student services, and institutional management.” The “accomplishments” the page lists, beginning in the late 1990’s, are sponsored by the very technology companies that have financially gained from the adoption of the technologies, such as Microsoft, during a time when student computer use on college campuses rose from 62.9% in 1997 to 84.9% in 2003 (Digest of Educational statistics 2009, table 429). There does not seem to be any unease that promotion of an educational technology, by a non-profit organization dedicated to improving education, and supported by company that will financially benefit, may be compromised and biased and not in the best interest of public community college students. But it will, however, benefit their role in sustaining the marketplace.

## **Conclusion**

American society seems, by its adoption of market language and paradigms as a guide for living, unhappy with the ‘trust us’ approach to public education, or the possibility that education impacts individuals through the course of their life, the results of which cannot be measured while they are still in school. The demand for instant gratification, that has become a mantra of choice and consumption in the US, creates the demand for instantly observable and measurable

results which are institutionalized through laws such as No Child Left Behind. To achieve these paradigm shifts, the educational institution is being described with the same terms used in the market, creating the illusion that the terms, and systems, are interchangeable. Over time the language used both within the market and the educational institution takes on a common sense appeal that is rarely questioned. Market paradigms are adopted to ensure “quality” and the final transformation of the metaphor, derived from student as customer nears completion. Once this happens, the market systems and neoliberal ethic of thought and action are embedded in the identity of the not-for-profit institutions such as Educause and The League of Innovation.

But what if these paradigms and metaphors are failing the communities that surround community colleges? What if they failed their civic and public duty when they transformed from metaphor to categorical description? What if they failed when market mechanisms, like continuous quality improvement programs were adopted by institutions and run through their paces with bureaucratic inefficiency pushing learning, education, content, creativity, diversity, and the common good to the bottom of the institutional template below more measurable and controllable assessments, learning outcomes, and customer demands?

Currently the system suggests that market paradigms derived from the philosophy of neoliberalism are the ones that our students and community should follow; that motivation for all action is economic; that all material, even intangible information, is measurable and negotiable; and that all students, and indeed teachers are entrepreneurs in and of themselves, continually trying to play the market and build a personal and educational portfolio that will attract investors willing to hire them for a job. Learning, if it takes place at all, is constantly happening within a buyers and sellers paradigm based more and more on measurable, and thereby controllable, outcomes.

Given that an overthrow of the neoliberal paradigm at this point is unlikely, an initial alternative to the onslaught of market paradigms and neoliberal philosophy in public community colleges would be to insist on a balance between market needs and civic needs; to try and change the perception of community colleges as businesses, which they are not; and to remind the local communities of the initial impetus for the foundation of the 2 year college over 100 years ago in

*Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, vol.9. no.1

America, as a “people’s college.” Americans should proceed on the basis that the members of their communities, and of the nation as a whole, deserve a chance at an education that remains cautiously apart from corporate influence.

Admittedly, such a suggestion is unlikely to gain traction in community colleges or other public higher education institutions. Given that what is described here as a neoliberal ethic, is often interpreted as simple common sense, it is difficult to question the relevance of systems and processes that are so widely embraced by the corporate world and public officials. Faculty, administrators, and students are overwhelmed with pressure from outside their institutions for successful outcomes measured in dollars earned or saved and employees trained. But, community colleges should be leading communities by embracing the value of all education as life enhancing and necessary for a strong republic, not just as a means to get a job and become more active in the consumer cycle. As long as there are public community colleges in the United States, then their responsibility and duty should continue to be for and to the public, and that does not mean capitulating without question to public or corporate whims. The expert duty of faculty and administrators to the community is to rise above consumer and market demands and first serve the public good. This duty is egalitarian and pluralistic, good for the individual, the community, the economy, and the state. If we consider education a product and our community colleges as consumer colleges, then we cease to serve the public good and serve only the market, corporations, and customers that occupy that sphere.

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*Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, vol.9. no.1

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Scott H. Boyd

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*Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, vol.9. no.1

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