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The Privatization of Our Public Universities

— by Claire Polster

Rather than setting their own research agendas in response to a variety of social needs and interests, academics are doing more and more research for and with "partners", often from the business community, who can afford to pay some of the costs of academic research.

There is a lot of talk these days about the privatization of Canada's—and Saskatchewan's—universities. But what exactly does "the privatization" of our public universities mean? Below, I address five of the ways in which our universities are being privatized and some of their implications for students and citizens. I also propose some strategies to resist this privatization which is very costly—both literally and figuratively—to us all.

Perhaps the most obvious kind of privatization of the university is the growing reliance on individuals rather than the collective to finance university operations. As students are all too aware, university tuition and other fees have been skyrocketing in recent years—as have student debts[1]. This is because students are paying a far larger share of the costs of postsecondary education, from an average of 18% of operating costs in 1990/91 to 32% of operating costs in 1998/99 (Canadian Federation of Students, 2001). As well, a growing number of university programs are slated to be, if they are not already, almost fully financed by students. For example, the University of Toronto recently announced its intention to increase its law school tuition to $25,000[2].

A second and less obvious kind of privatization of our universities has to do with the ways in which they are run. Increasingly universities, which are public institutions, are adopting values and practices that are employed in the private sector. This shift is reflected in the new language being used in our universities in which our presidents are "CEOs", professors are "human resources", and students are "clients". It is reflected in the displacement of academic criteria by economic criteria in the allocation of institutional resources. And it is reflected in the many new managerial practices that are being employed by university administrators—ranging from greater secrecy in the running of institutional affairs, to various forms of pseudo-consultation, to the increased use of performance indicators and merit pay to control and motivate academic workers - all of which erode the collegialism and institutional democracy that have been the hallmarks of university governance[3].

The adoption of business values and practices is cause and consequence of another kind of privatization, which is the universities' growing involvement in research for hire. Rather than setting their own research agendas in response to a variety of social needs and interests, academics are doing more and more research for and with "partners", often from the business community, who can afford to pay some of the costs of academic research. This shift towards research for hire is also a product of changes in government funding which have led to a reduction in support for investigator-initiated research and an increase in support for "partnership research"[4]. What is significant about this form of privatization is that although control over the research agenda is being ceded to private interests, the costs of academic research are still largely borne by the public, as partners' contributions to research costs often cover only a small fraction of them.

Over the last twenty years, the Canadian government has been progressively ceding control over the policy-making related to universities to unelected and unaccountable advisory bodies, such as the Advisory Council on Science and Technology, that are dominated by members of the business community and others who are sympathetic to their interests.

This third kind of privatization is related to a fourth, namely the privatization of government. Over the last twenty years, the Canadian government has been progressively ceding control over the policy-making related to universities to unelected and unaccountable advisory bodies, such as the Advisory Council on Science and Technology, that are dominated by members of the business community and others who are sympathetic to their interests. Not surprisingly, people on these powerful committees have used them to produce policies and to institutionalize practices that serve their particular needs rather than those of the general public. This is a very troubling development not only for our universities, but for democracy in our country more generally.

The final form of privatization has to do not with our universities serving business or adopting the values of business, but with their becoming knowledge businesses in their own right. Increasingly, universities and the academics within them are getting involved in lucrative entrepreneurial or commercial activities of their own—selling ring-side seats to leading edge research, setting up university spin-off companies, licensing valuable intellectual property, etc[5]. This form of privatization is particularly egregious, as knowledge produced in public institutions, by public servants, with public funds is not being freely shared with Canadian citizens but is being exploited for private profit. In other words, rather than upholding a public service ethic, universities and academics are adopting a self-service ethic—using public funds to meet their own needs and interests as opposed to those of the surrounding community and the wider society.

It is important to emphasize that these five kinds of privatization are not discrete but are mutually reinforcing. For example, the more universities get involved in research for business, the more they have to operate as a business: the more secrecy they require, the more bureaucracy they require, and the less democracy and collegialism they can tolerate. Similarly, the more universities are involved in entrepreneurial activities of their own, the more resources they must devote to these activities; hence, the increases in the tuition and other fees paid by students.

The privatization of our universities has a number of harmful implications for both students and citizens. For many students privatization simply means paying more for less. Their higher tuition and other fees are not compensated by an increase in the quality of the education they receive. On the contrary, privatization is eroding their education by contributing to reduced library holdings, deteriorating lab equipment and physical plant, growing class sizes, and reduced choice in terms of course offerings and areas of research specialization. Privatization is also reducing students' access to professors and to leading edge knowledge, as academics engaged in cutting edge research are often freed from their teaching responsibilities or are unable or unwilling to disclose the details of their research until (and often after) it is converted into private property. Not only are students receiving an inferior education, but changes in university operations and values afford students very little space and opportunity to try to change things, even assuming they had the time and resources to do this, which most do not given the impacts of very high tuition and other fees.

While for some students privatization means paying more for less university education, for others privatization means being unable to afford university education altogether. According to the Canadian Federation of Students, after graduate and professional user fees were deregulated in Ontario, the participation rates of low income families were cut in half (CFS, 2001)[6]. In this context, it is worth flagging the dangers of on-line education which is being touted as a possible solution to the accessibility problem in Saskatchewan and elsewhere. We need to be very wary of on-line education because it has the potential to produce a two-tiered system of higher education with elite, actual education for those who can afford it, and inferior, virtual education for those who cannot.

There are many ways in which citizens are harmed by the privatization of our universities. We are harmed in the sense that the benefits and use of university resources are increasingly controlled by private interests, whereas the costs of our universities are still largely paid by us. We are also harmed because privatization progressively reduces the ability and willingness of academics and university administrators to meet the needs of groups other than the business community, particularly disadvantaged groups. For example, as more and more of the university's research resources are devoted to serving the needs of paying partners, there are less resources available for, and less perks associated with, serving the needs of groups who cannot afford to sponsor academic research such as women, poor people, small farmers, aboriginal people, etc. Moreover, even when research that may be of use to these groups is done, it may not be accessible to them as more and more of the knowledge produced in our universities is being converted into private, intellectual property.

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Not only is privatization rendering our universities less and less useful to more and more of us, but it is also making our universities less trustworthy and reliable. As universities become more involved in business ventures of others or of their own, they are less able and/or less inclined to put the public interest over private interests, as the cases of Nancy Olivieri and David Healy, among many others, clearly illustrate[7].

Ultimately, the privatization of our universities threatens to leave our society without a disinterested or an uncompromised source of expertise to which we can turn for assessments or advice on important social, economic, and political questions, such as the impacts of genetically engineered foods or the safety of various drugs and treatments. This will be a tremendous loss to all of us, which is all the more tragic given that even those who have been pushing the privatization agenda stand to be harmed by it.

Although the wave of privatization is sweeping strongly over all Canadian—and Saskatchewan—universities, there is still opportunity for citizens to collectively resist and reverse it. At the local level, citizens and community groups can demand greater input into university decision-making processes through greater representation on formal bodies (such as boards of governors) and greater inclusion in various kinds of consultative exercises. We can also insist that our universities develop mechanisms to enhance their sensitivity and responsiveness to a broad range of social needs and interests, such as the European science shops which conduct research for communities and groups that cannot afford to sponsor academic research[8]. At the national level, citizens can challenge both the particular government policies that promote privatization in our universities and the privatization of the policy-making process itself. We can also press for new policies and initiatives that will repair if not reverse the damage done to our universities and to the democratic process, such as increases in the base funding of our universities and the establishment of national consensus conferences on higher education that are modelled after the highly inclusive and successful consensus conferences sponsored by the Danish Boards of Technology[9]. At the same time that we draw on ideas from other places, Canadian citizens must also develop strategies that are tailored to our particular locations and histories. Given Saskatchewan's long and proud tradition of harnessing our resources for the collective good, there should be no shortage of creative ideas to reclaim and revitalize our public universities once we set our minds to the task.

Notes

1. *According to the Canadian Federation of Students, between 1990/91 and 2000/2001, tuition fees in Canada rose by 126%. Over the same period, average student debts rose from about $8700 to $25,000 (CFS, 2001). This year, Saskatchewan students paid an average of $4793 in tuition and other fees. This is 12% higher than the national average and higher only than the fees paid by students in Nova Scotia and Ontario. (http://www.statcan.ca?Daily/English/020909/d020909a.htm#)*

2. *Universities are also attempting to raise funds through various kinds of deals with corporations, such as those that grant soft-drink companies monopoly pouring rights on campus. These deals have been criticized for a number of reasons, including that they may increase costs for both individuals and/or universities; they may reduce consumer choice; and they may infringe on democratic rights, such as when non-disparagement clauses (which forbid criticism of corporate sponsors or their products on campus) are part of the deal.*

3. *At the University of Saskatchewan, the new managerial practice of "integrated planning", whereby decisions regarding departmental budgets are made by committees composed entirely of senior administrators, is being challenged by faculty on the basis that it contravenes the legislative authority of the administration and board of governors. For a more detailed account of growing managerialism at the U of S, see Tim Quigley "A Study in Top-Down Mismanagement", CAUT Bulletin vol. 50(1), p. A13.*

4. *According to Polanyi, as a result of government and other partnering schemes, Canada has twice the percentage of university research funded by industry as compared with the United States, despite the fact that our industries are less high-tech than their U.S. counterparts. J. Polanyi http://www.caut.ca/english/bulletin/2002_dec/commentary.asp.*

5. *The recent establishment of a technology transfer office at the University of Regina reflects that institution's (or its administration's) intention to become increasingly involved in entrepreneurial and commercialization activities.*

6. *This bodes poorly for low-income families in the province of Saskatchewan which ranks last in Canada in the percent of poor households whose head of the family has completed any post-secondary education (Doherty-Delorme and Shaker, 2000/2001, p. 11).*

7. *Dr. Nancy Olivieri, a renowned researcher at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, was subjected to all sorts of harassment after informing her patients that a drug she was testing on them for a private corporation was hazardous to their health. David Healy, another well-respected researcher, had a job offer at a prestigious academic institute revoked after he publicly questioned the safety of a drug that is manufactured by one of the institute's major corporate donors.*

8. *For more information on science shops, see the webpage of the International Science Shop Network at http://www.bio.uu.nl/living-knowledge/scienceshops.html.*

9. *For more information on these conferences, see G. Middendorf et. al., 1998. "New Agricultural Biotechnologies: The struggle for democratic choice", Monthly Review vol. 50(3), pp. 94-96.*

Citations

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