

Lechuga, V. M. (2006). *The Changing Landscape of the Academic Profession: The Culture of Faculty at For-Profit Colleges and Universities*. New York and London: Routledge. Pages: 234. Price: £ 50.00 (hardcover).

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The proliferation of for-profit universities and colleges in the United States represents a major departure from traditional post-secondary education in that country. The neoliberal (labelled neoconservative by Americans) agenda embraces the notion that all levels of education ought to be subject to market forces rather than public purposes, so it is hardly surprising that the for-profits operate throughout its ideological homeland. Indeed, they now constitute nearly 20% of all degree-granting institutions in the United States. Vincente Lechuga writes in his introductory chapter that his intention is “neither to bemoan nor celebrate the rise in prominence of for-profit colleges and universities” (p. 10) but to examine what he calls “faculty culture,” that sense of self that has traditionally been fostered inside the academy in association with the principles of research expectations, academic freedom, tenure, and collegial governance. Intended or not, his presentation paints a particularly gloomy picture of academic life in these new commercial institutions. But it should hardly come as a surprise that Lechuga’s study reveals that the profit motive completely overwhelms any pretension of respect for the centuries-old academic university culture.

The study contributes to deepening our understanding of the form and function of these new institutions through a case study approach that analyses survey data gathered at four very different types of profit-driven schools of higher education, each one pitching a product to its own well defined consumer market. (A fifth institution declined to allow its faculty to participate in the study). In circumstances where education is first and foremost a saleable commodity, the instructional labour force is confronted with an array of factors that place restrictions on the work they are expected to do. Lechuga writes that the collegial governance structure of traditional universities is completely absent and that academic freedom is so restricted that it can hardly be said to exist at all. Indeed, at one of the four universities examined in *The Changing Landscape*, Lechuga reports that faculty lived in fear that the administration might learn that they even uttered terms like union and tenure. It makes pretty bleak reading, so bleak in fact, that it causes one to wonder if these institutions actually deserve to be considered universities in the first place. The author seeks to discover a university faculty culture at for-profit schools; he does not find even a pale replica of it.

When the touchstones of traditional university culture, starting with the pursuit of academic truth itself, are considered unnecessary or even irrelevant and where professors are not expected to undertake academic research like their cohorts do at non-profit private and public universities, is it proper to consider the degrees that they issue are the equivalent of those that embrace the founda-

tions usually considered central to academic integrity? This is the crux of the problem, because without some kind of official sanction of the pseudo-academic programs that are being marketed, there would be no customers. *The Changing Landscape* mentions that all of the schools in its survey are “nationally and/or regionally accredited” (p. 7); however, the reader is provided no information about the criteria that bring such an academic status. All of those features that we typically associate in our understanding about what constitutes the primary characteristics of a university – institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and tenure, among other things – are quite irrelevant in the neo-liberal conception. There is no room for them in for-profit universities because these principles undermine the return on investment which would defeat the very purpose of undertaking the establishment of these institutions in the first place.

In the neoliberal world of the United States, profit-driven universities and colleges must be given some form of accreditation if they are to stay in operation; it represents the licence to do business in the global economy of post-secondary education. The gulf between the traditional academic university and the new private corporate version is unbridgeable, as Lechuga’s study illustrates. Indeed, his comparison of faculty cultures leads one to conclude that there is a qualitative difference between them. The neoliberal solution to the contradiction has been to redesign accreditation expectations away from age-old conventions like academic freedom and practices of collegial governance, qualities that continue to represent the touchstones of university integrity. A long propaganda campaign of cynicism has derided these considerations as dangerously idealistic or meaningless self-interested platitudes. Shuffled to the forefront are measurable customer outcomes that can be delivered through institutions organized according to the requirements of neoliberal capitalism.

In Canada, the for-profit post-secondary education phenomenon is a good deal less developed than it is south of the border; early forays have seen individual provinces scrambling to establish some means of governmental oversight. This development has created gates of entry for the for-profits rather than barriers which would have served the public interest much more effectively. The reason is obvious enough. Federal trade policy has had a markedly neoliberal orientation since the original free trade agreement was signed with the United States in 1989 and the complete eradication of operational grants from that source in support of public universities since the mid-1990s pushed administrators into the global education economy. Provincial governments across the country have encouraged university and college administrators to expand their international student enrolment to make up for the lost revenue. The good international reputation of Canadian institutions has contributed to a partial alleviation of the original funding shortfall but there are consequences attached to playing in the global education market. Canadian governments (federal and provincial) have presently embarked on a campaign to remake the country’s accreditation process to accommodate the institutions of the sort described in *The Changing Landscape*. To that end, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada

(CMEC) has produced a draft of what it calls “quality assurance” indicators based on demonstrable student learning outcomes. The proposed new regime is bound to undermine the long standing Canadian convention of accrediting institutions on the basis of meeting the membership expectations of the Association of University and Colleges (AUCC). A recent article in that organization’s monthly journal outlined a few of those conditions. As a condition of membership in AUCC, member institutions are required to adhere to a number of quality assurance principles, including the continuous assessment of programs. Members must also have in place governance and administrative structures that the association considers vital to a university; these include an independent board of governors and the authority for academic programs vested in the academic staff (Charbonneau, 2007, p. 5).

The debased institutions analysed by Vincente Lechuga fail to meet significant tests of academic credibility. Indeed, they are a different order of thing altogether. Sadly, the flaws that he has identified are irrelevant in the neoliberal order that prevails in the United States where private corporate interests are paramount. Academic authority has not yet been overthrown in Canada but it is becoming increasingly clear that the political elite of the country has already embraced the logic of neoliberalism with respect to the higher education sector of the country. The new national regime of quality indicators aims to undermine the academic integrity provisions that have served the country well for a very long time. Alas, when the international trade policy of Canada comes up against the public interest, as it does in this instance, neoliberal ideology usually prevails. Those Canadians who respect the academy and the ideals for which it stands have little reason to be optimistic. ♣

Reference List

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The instances of discrimination in terms of race/ethnicity, religion, language, sexual orientation, and gender have become recurrent in institutions of higher learning in the North America, be it overtly or covertly. Despite our pronouncements of achieving a harmonious society where equality prevails, the