

# academic capitalism

by steve g. hoffman

The chase for dollars is a hallmark of the twenty-first century research university. Most campuses now maintain a technology transfer office to ease the process of patenting and marketing research-based technology. On-campus startup companies have become commonplace. Nearly every university produces reams of glossy promotional material to highlight its particular identity, assets, and market niche. Students are commonly conceived of, and often conceive of themselves, as paying consumers who need an enjoyable and friction-free instructional product.

“Academic capitalism” is an umbrella term for capturing the wide array of market and market-like activities universities engage in to generate exter-

and foundation grants, informal pressures for creative research entrepreneurship, or faculty self-promotion through branding, personal web sites, and blogging. While universities have long been deeply intertwined with markets and states, a series of relatively novel trends have emerged in the contemporary United States to warrant the term “academic capitalism.”

First, there has been a historically specific transformation of the policy and resource environment of American higher education. Beginning in the 1940s and accelerating through the 1950s, the U.S. government funded academic research to a greater extent than ever before. This federal commitment to research and development, mobi-

on “deliverable” technologies. At the same time, a research policy idea gradually grew into a bipartisan conviction that one way to combat the “technology gap” between the United States, on one side, and Japan and Germany, on the other, was to view universities as centers for innovation and economic growth. With federal dollars for university research leveling and cutbacks anticipated, many university officials joined a movement to ease restrictions on university knowledge transfer.

A second noteworthy trend, closely related to the transformation of the research policy environment, is an attempt to fit the practices and culture of academia to the global “new economy.” For example, a heightened focus on the “relevance,” “impact,” and “translation” of research, rather than open-ended discovery, may be conducive to emerging production processes. Some scholars of academic capitalism see a push within pedagogical practice for “practical” training and toward preparing students for an economy based in media consumption and service provision. In addition, government subsidies and incentive systems promote an infrastructure of on-campus organizations that blur the line between public and private interests, such as interdisciplinary research institutes that focus on industry and locale-specific research problems (hydrofracking in New York state).

A third trend is the transformation of the academic labor market. This is the most vivid site of inequality, exploitation, and power struggle in the new

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nal revenues from education, research, and service. First introduced into the scholarly lexicon in the mid-1990s by researchers Sheila Slaughter, Larry Leslie, and Gary Rhoades, the term poses an oxymoron, violating the common conception that academics should be motivated by the pursuit of new knowledge and the elevation of learning over profit.

Academic capitalism can refer to direct market activity like patenting, licensing, and industry consulting as well as market-like behavior such as fierce competition for public, private,

lized initially for the war effort and then greatly expanded for university-based basic science, became institutionalized by the creation of the National Science Foundation in 1950 and the military’s Advanced Research Projects Agency in 1958. The government significantly underwrote innovations in biomedical research as well, institutionalized by the earlier creation of the National Institutes of Health.

By the late 1970s, however, the U.S. military narrowed its financial support for open-ended science by focusing



academic capitalist order. A concerted effort to grow the number of tuition-paying students has outpaced the hiring of tenure-track and tenured faculty on most research campuses. Much of the slack has been taken up by a remarkable increase in part-time, adjunct, or graduate student instructors working on a class-by-class basis. Along with this increasing proportion of low paid contingent labor has come a dramatic growth of administrative staff to supervise new outreach programs, devise accountability and efficiency schemes, and manage revenue flows.

The new employment structure has created significant tensions within university governance as non-academic personnel and managerial advisors grow in number and clout. The recent events at the University of Virginia, in which non-academic members of the Board of Visitors tried to oust President (and sociologist) Teresa Sullivan, provide a textbook example.

If an initial wave of research on “academic capitalism” tended to focus on cases where the profit motive encroached upon the public good mission of colleges and universities, more recent work has moved away from this “corporatization” or “encroachment”

thesis. Academic capitalism now typically refers not so much to the colonization or capture of higher education by industry, but to a more profound blurring of public-private boundaries, in which the material base and normative assumptions of academic life are being transformed.

No single term could possibly cover all of these trends without getting over-

stretched. It should come as no surprise, then, that research on university change has produced its fair share of jargon. The most common alternate to academic capitalism is the more euphemistic “entrepreneurial university,” which social scientists in business schools and higher education administration scholars tend to gravitate to. The term “neo-liberal university,” which links the transformation of the university since the late 1970s to a similar transformation in the relationship between state and privately contracted services, has gained traction

among some researchers. Less common are more empirically specific descriptors like the “patent grant university,” the “triple helix” of state, industry, and university, the “audit university” (used primarily by European scholars), or “the schizophrenic university” (evocative of the confusion and disarray of an institution with so many competing missions).

These alternative terms all point toward an institutional model in which federal, state, and local governments facilitate university-industry partnerships through incentives, subsidies, and weakened regulation, and where the role of universities is to champion economic growth and market results. Contradictions and inequalities abound, as some campuses and some researchers are far better positioned to reap the rewards of this new model than others.

When regional and national economies depend upon university-industry partnerships for economic viability, scores of underpaid part-time college instructors race from one campus to another, or deans urge humanities professors with expertise in topics like nineteenth century indigenous African

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literature to become more “entrepreneurial,” we know that “academic capitalism” has arrived.

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