

## Neoliberal Ideology in Community College Mission Statements: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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### Article:

With more than 1,200 campuses serving nearly half of all undergraduate learners in the United States, the community college is a major institution of postsecondary education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Conventions of the community college up to late modernity have included public support as well as commitments to teaching, open access, an identified service area, community-based programs, comprehensive programs, and learning support services (Vaughan, 1997). The community college is particularly distinct among institutions of postsecondary education in that it serves learners through a variety of programs including student services, career education, developmental education, community education, transfer and liberal education, and general education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Another singularity of the community college is that it serves a unique student population, including high numbers of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds; a disproportionately large share of learners who are African American, American Indian, Asian, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander; and nearly half of first-generation college students in the United States (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Because the community college is often the only viable educational option for members of marginalized communities, the structural outcomes of its mission are of great consequence to educators, policymakers, and citizens concerned with social justice and participatory democracy.

Proponents of the community college, referred to by Kevin Dougherty (2001) as functionalist advocates (e.g., Cohen & Brawer, 2003), have identified this institution as "the People's college" and "Democracy's college." Citing its all-around accessibility, functionalist advocates contend that the community college facilitates the realization of the "American dream" for those of humble means and that the institution serves an egalitarian function in society. As one example of this function, advocates assert that the community college provides needed job training for those without the ability, means, or interest to attend four-year institutions. In this view, the community college affords the disadvantaged an opportunity for employment, financial independence, and personal development. Such an outcome may represent the ideal, perhaps; however, in this article, I contrast this vision against pervasive neoliberal discourses that threaten to engulf the mission and purpose of the community college.

The rising dominion of neoliberal ideology within the discourse of community college education diverges from the vision of the functional advocates because it promotes consumerism in lieu of participatory democracy and legitimates the world view of the upper strata of society to the exclusion of alternative perspectives (Chomsky, 2000; Engel, 2000; Giroux & Giroux, 2004; McChesney, 1999). In order to confront neoliberalism's opaque ideology, this critical discourse analysis reveals ideological-discursive practices that, when viewed tacitly from within the Western neoliberal hegemony, seem to be neutral and commonsensical but, when analyzed through a critical theoretical lens, refashion the meaning of community college education so that it serves the interests of those in the upper social strata.

Broadly conceived, the purpose of this analysis is to illustrate the downward transmission of ideological norms from the level of social formation to the level of the institution via ideological-discursive practices. My main thesis is that, insofar as the community college mission is represented through neoliberal discourse, the community college itself is instrumental in reproducing the class inequalities associated with advanced capitalism, thereby supporting the position of its instrumentalist Marxist critics (Clark, 1960; Karabel, 1972; Zwerling, 1976; see also Dougherty, 2001). While these researchers have discussed the community college's role in reproducing social inequality for more than 40 years, the analysis in this article is unique in explaining social reproduction as a discursive phenomenon. Doing so is not intended to discount the theories espoused by the aforementioned community college critics. Instead, following discourse theory, I contend that the social processes described by these theorists are a consequence of discourse. Lillie Chouliariki and Norman Fairclough (1999) elaborate on the instrumental nature of discourse:

It is an important characteristic of the economic, social and cultural changes of late modernity that they exist as *discourses* as well as processes that are taking place outside discourse, and that the processes that are taking place outside discourse are substantively shaped by these discourses.

(p. 4)

In other words, discourse is the medium through which economic, social, and cultural processes transpire. It is problematic, however, when the ideologies manifest in discourse are opaque, when unjust discourses proliferate uncontested, and when discursive alternatives are not considered. In these circumstances, it is of paramount importance for critical educators to reveal and confront such ideological-discursive practices through critical discourse analytical research.

On behalf of those who believe strongly in the egalitarian project of the community college, I aspire to reveal and challenge the discourse of neoliberalism, or market fundamentalism, and call for a counter-hegemonic discourse more fitting for an institution that, by virtue of its accessibility, is well positioned to serve the interests of a democratic society. I further suggest that, if the community college is to realize the vision of the functionalist advocates, its mission and purpose must be represented by a discourse of emancipation. That is, the term "community college" must come to signify an opportunity for people from all segments of society to realize their full potential. Furthermore, this potential must not be defined solely in terms of earnings and economic productivity but instead must address a broad range of human capacities.

Before proceeding to the analysis, I will provide an overview and critique of neoliberal ideology to situate the targeted discourse within its late modern context. Then I will explain how discourse analysis draws from linguistics and critical social science to explain how language constitutes meanings and exists in a dialectical relationship with social processes and material realities. Following this overview of the analytical framework, I will discuss ideological-discursive practices at the national level that promote a neoliberal world view. A full accounting of these widely circulated discourses is not possible, so I focus specifically on discourse fragments extracted from speeches by President Bill Clinton and President George W. Bush. Semiotic themes within the discourse of neoliberalism are then traced to discursive practices promulgated by well-known community college leaders and scholars. Finally, the manifestations of neoliberal discourse at the level of the institution become the center of focus. Specifically, I explain how certain language practices—as they appear in community college mission statements—represent the community college mission as an economic endeavor. I also examine the ideological effects on related social practices such as program planning, learning, and the negotiation of power relations and learner identities.

### THE ASCENDANCY OF MARKET FUNDAMENTALISM

Classical liberal economics originated in 1776 with Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, "the Bible of capitalist economics" (Engel, 2000, p. 20). In this work, Smith proposed that prices of goods self-regulate through free trade as buyers and sellers bargain for a mutually beneficial exchange. In this exchange, prices automatically settle at an equilibrium, or the point at which the seller benefits in the form of profit and the buyer benefits from procurement of the good. As such, according to Smith, the materialistic, self-interested endeavors of the populace result in a utopian society, one managed not by government incompetence but instead by the "invisible hand" of the market.

In the latter part of the 20th century, these ideas gained renewed viability in the United States, particularly through the free-market doctrines of Friedrich A. von Hayek (1994). Hayek's resurrection of classical liberal economics differed in one fundamental aspect, however. Whereas Adam Smith advocated minimal government involvement in the free market, von Hayek argued that the government should, in fact, take deliberate steps to ensure the workings of the free market (Spring, 1998). Nobel laureate Milton Friedman's book *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) precipitated further allegiance to Hayek's free-market ideals, particularly among policy makers in the United States and the United Kingdom. In this widely read treatise, Friedman argued that, in a free society, social problems are best resolved through market activity and not through government intervention. Manfred Steger (2002) summarizes these classical economic principles:

The state should only provide the legal framework for contracts, defense, and law and order. Public-policy initiatives should be confined to those measures that liberate the economy from social constraints: privatization of public enterprises, deregulation instead of state control, liberalization of trade and industry, massive tax cuts, strict control of organized labor, and the reduction of public expenditures.

(p. 12)

In consequence, advocates of these economic principles argue that the sole purpose of government is to provide a favorable climate for business and industry; thus, public well-being becomes less a civic endeavor and more a function of market activity. As the discourse of neoliberalism intensified, it gained the support of such political leaders as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. In fact, the terms of these leaders marked the beginning of an era during which the markets were the primary interest of government, and challenges to the market's ascendancy were met with forceful defenses of neoliberal capitalism, particularly in Latin America (Chomsky, 1999; 2000; MacEwan, 1999).

Aligning more fully with neoliberal principles, national economic goals in the United States have shifted from full employment to technology as a proxy for labor (Aronowitz, 2001; Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994), from the living wage to an all-out commitment to global competitiveness (Spring, 1998), and from democracy to the radical sovereignty of market forces (Chomsky, 1999; Giroux, 2001; Engel, 2000; MacEwan, 1999). Often captured in terms such as "market fundamentalism," the "new capitalism," "market ideology," and "turbo capitalism," this doctrine has drawn harsh criticism from grassroots activists, engaged scholars, and a few political leaders on both the right and the left (Steger, 2002). Robert McChesney (1999) describes neoliberalism in austere terms:

Neoliberalism is the defining political economic paradigm of our time—it refers to the policies and processes whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit.

(p. 7)

A principal argument against neoliberal policy is that it limits the power of citizens to advocate for social change through democratic processes. Arthur MacEwan (1999) articulates this criticism well:

By reducing explicit social regulation of private economic activity and "leaving things up to the market," neo-liberalism prevents the implementation of programmes that would allow people to exercise political control over their economic affairs, involve people in solving their own economic problems, and serve the material needs of the great majority.

(p. 5)

McChesney refers to neoliberalism as "the immediate and foremost enemy of genuine participatory democracy" (p. 11), and Henry Giroux (2001) refers to the current social order as a "dystopian culture of neoliberalism" (p. 426). Within the neoliberal regime, public education is reduced to two purposes: national defense and human capital development (Engel, 2000). To the extent that education is geared toward the latter, the purpose of education migrates from democratic ends to economic ends; that is, the discourse of education for participation and leadership in democratic society is overtaken by the economic discourse of production and consumerism. This recontextualization of educational discourse often emerges through endorsements of human capital theory.

Economists define human capital as "the stock of knowledge and skills possessed by the labor force that increases its productivity" (Engel, 2000, p. 24). As L. Steven Zwerling (1976) notes,

human capital theory can be traced back to Adam Smith's classical liberal economics, although it was in a very basic form at the time. Accompanying the resurgence of free-market doctrines, however, human capital emerged as a keen interest of economists in the 1960s. This renewed interest in human capital began with the 1960 meeting of the American Economic Association when Theodore W. Schultz focused his presidential address on human capital accounting. Schultz (1977) noted in this speech:

Although it is obvious that people acquire useful skills and knowledge, it is not obvious that these skills and knowledge are a form of capital, that this capital is in substantial part a product of deliberate investment, that it has grown in Western societies at a much faster rate than conventional (nonhuman) capital, and that its growth may well be the most distinctive feature of the economic system. It has been widely observed that increases in national output have been large compared with the increases of land, man-hours, and physical reproducible capital. Investment in human capital is probably the major explanation for this difference. (p. 313)

With this speech, Schultz initiated a flurry of research, the purpose of which was to account for various components of production, now to include human capital. The problem, however, was how to account for human capital in equations that explain production. Arising from this agenda were two prominent works, Gary Becker's (1964) *Human Capital* and Edward Denison's (1963) *Measuring the Contribution of Education to Economic Growth*.

Human capital accounting provided an economic rationale for allocating taxpayer dollars toward education. During this era, in fact, education ceased to be described as an expenditure but instead as an investment (Engel, 2000). Because education was an investment in capital, it promoted economic growth, so the argument ran, and economic growth is the primary aim of free market capitalism. Although human capital accounting resulted in increased expenditures for education, it reduced learning to its economic aspect.

The argument for public investment in education, when based on human capital theory, sanctions the idea that education is acceptable only to the extent that it yields a return on investment; therefore, non-commodified areas of study such as philosophy, literature, and others cannot be justified (Giroux, 2001; Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Engel, 2000). Educational investment based on this rationale, therefore, results in a "cost-benefit strait-jacket for curriculum development" (Engel, 2000, p. 30). Furthermore, human capital theory is less an empirical reality than an article of faith (Engel, 2000; Spring, 1998). Various studies (Berg, 1970; Machlup, 1970; Thurow, 1977) have exposed methodological flaws, unconfirmed assumptions, and ideological bias in human capital theory and its line of research. As such, within a few decades, interest in human capital theory as a line of research diminished substantially (Engel, 2000; Spring 1998). Its ideological underpinnings, however, continue to provide politicians and educators with a powerful discourse for garnering public support of educational initiatives that meet the interests of business and industry (Spring, 1998).

Indeed, despite its shortcomings, political and educational leaders often draw from human capital theory to justify the cost of education to taxpayers, citing its effect on overall economic development. The line of reasoning here is that the allocation of taxpayer dollars toward

developing human capital results in higher levels of productivity, greater profits for private enterprise, and, thus, economic growth. This economic growth is said to yield higher levels of employment and eventually an improved quality of life for all.

Once again, the claims espoused through this discourse are not borne out in practice. Although, the minimum wage still exists today, it has declined 26% in real value since 1979 (Economic Policy Institute, 2004) despite increases in productivity and economic development, particularly in the 1990s. Furthermore, "in the 1990s, U.S. unemployment rates declined while the gap between the rich and poor increased" (Spring, 1998, p. 224), and income inequality is greater today than at any time in the past 70 years (Chomsky, 1999).

Given the rising levels of inequality since the mid-1900s—even during periods of high employment—one can reasonably conclude that economic development is not necessarily equivalent to wealth expansion. In fact, it is widely acknowledged by critics and proponents of neoliberalism alike that, in today's advanced capitalist society, the distribution of social goods typically associated with economic development is highly asymmetrical (Chomsky, 1999; Spring, 1998; Steger, 2002). Thus, a developed economy within a neoliberal state is not necessarily equivalent to a rise in the standard of living for all segments of society. Insofar as the community college joins with neoliberal discourses to represent its mission, it takes an active role in reproducing ideologies associated with structural inequality.

#### CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), formerly critical linguistics, applies linguistic and semiotic analysis toward a social problem such as structures of dominance and oppression (Fairclough, 1995). It is based on understanding language as a force of dominance and ideology (Habermas, 1977). Furthermore, critical discourse analysts submit that powerful regimes produce discourses that shape the meanings of social and material processes in such a way as to secure their own interests. CDA offers critical theorists a way of understanding the production and consequences of dominant discourses. It is an approach to analyzing "opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language" (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 2).

With roots in systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Hasan, 1989) CDA is grounded in a view of language not as a simple tool for communicating information but as a means of ordering social activity. In other words, language constitutes social action; it is the site where meanings are created and changed. For instance, I argue in this article that, within the neoliberal milieu, the meaning of community college education has shifted from a community-based social practice focused on the needs of learner systems (Boone, 1992) to a market-based social practice focused on the needs of business and industry. Once defined in this way by the neoliberal regime, community college education no longer signifies an opportunity for cognitive, intellectual, and leadership development as well as other types of personal growth typically associated with postsecondary education but instead becomes an investment in production. As a consequence of this semiotic change, related social practices such as program planning, teaching, learning, and assessment all realign with the demands of business and industry. Along with these shifts, the view of community college education as a means of human capital development becomes the norm. Critical theory is an attempt to understand how such a norm comes to be

accepted even though it reproduces social inequality and threatens democratic culture. CDA is therefore a complement to critical theory in that it offers a way of studying the way power and language figure in the construction of meanings of social practices (Wodak & Meyer, 2001), particularly those enacted by social institutions.

Norman Fairclough (1995) positions social institutions such as the community college at the junction between two levels of social structuring. The highest and most abstract level of social structuring is that of the social formation, and the most concrete level is that of the particular social event or action. Fairclough contends that social institutions and their discourses are determined by the social formation, although it must be noted that the direction of determination is not inevitably unidirectional. Determination may transpire dialectically.

Because discourses are determined by higher levels of social structuring, texts—such as community college mission statements—and the discourses they represent are not created entirely by individuals. Instead, individual producers of text can only choose among the discursive options available at higher levels of social structuring. Because no ideology is monolithic, multiple discourses exist and are available to producers of text, although hegemonic discourses may make alternatives nearly imperceptible. Because discourses reflect ideologies of groups with unequal power resources and because the producer of text must choose among these discourses, he or she engages in a negotiation of power relations.

To the degree that powerful groups act upon discourses at various levels of social structuring, their ideologies and world views gain authority. Dominant discourses consequently determine the meanings assigned to social and material processes, and they do this in ways that reinforce power inequities. One way that meanings may be determined is through recontextualization (Fairclough, 1995). Recontextualization is a process in which the discourse related to one social process dominates or colonizes the discourse related to another social process.

My analysis demonstrates how this progression works by explaining in linguistic terms how discourses related to community college education are recontextualized by discourses relating to neoliberal ideology. Consistent with Fairclough, I propose that the community college is an intermediary institution positioned between the highest and lowest levels of social structuring and that its discourses are determined largely by the social formation. In other words, language choices made at the level of the institution may be severely limited by the ideological-discursive options available at the level of social formation. This study, therefore, addresses a particular type of education in its semiotic aspect. By connecting dominant discourses at the level of the social formation with specific ideological-discursive practices at the level of the institution, this study reveals how education comes to signify economic processes that represent the interests of powerful groups.

## HEGEMONY

According to Bernard McKenna (2004), "It is the facility of taken-for-granted 'common sense' that provides ideology with its strongest ideological effect" (p. 13). This analysis demonstrates how national political leaders, educational leaders, scholars, and producers of local institutional texts subscribe to the discourse of neoliberalism in representing the mission and purpose of the community college. These tacit, discursive endorsements of neoliberal ideology, perhaps by

unsuspecting actors, illustrate McKenna's point: The discursive manifestations of neoliberal ideology in political speeches, publications by the American Association of Community Colleges, and community college mission statements represent common assumptions about the mission and purpose of the community college in late modernity. That these manifestations of an unjust ideology proceed largely uncontested suggests a hegemonic state of affairs. This Gramscian concept is fundamental to my argument, which Barry Burke (1999) defines:

By hegemony, Gramsci meant the permeation *throughout* society of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs and morality that has the effect of supporting the status quo in power relations. Hegemony in this sense might be defined as an "organising principle" that is diffused by the process of socialisation into every area of daily life. To the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalised by the population it becomes part of what is generally called "common sense" so that the philosophy, culture and morality of the ruling elite comes to appear as the natural order of things. (19)

Along similar lines, Gordon Marshall (1998) explains that hegemony "involves the production of ways of thinking and seeing, and of excluding alternative visions and discourses" (p. 272). Henry Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux (2004) connect the concept of hegemony to late modernity: "As the discourse of neoliberalism seizes the public imagination, there is no vocabulary for political or social transformation, democratically inspired visions, or critical notions of social agency to enlarge the meaning and purpose of democratic public life" (p. 251). Noting the invasion of market discourses into social practices at all levels of society, no matter how inappropriate, Bernard McKenna (2004) observes that "the neoliberal hegemony in Western culture is very close to absolute" (p. 17). Noam Chomsky (1999, 2000) likens this development to the regimentation of minds, and Michael Engel (2000) claims that neoliberal ideology has become a secular religion.

## REPRESENTATIONS OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE WITHIN NATIONAL DISCOURSES

Central to my argument is the concept that discursive practices both reflect and construct a worldview in which the markets are seen as fundamental to the national interests when they are, in fact, of primary interest to those affiliated with power and wealth. Within this discourse, education is represented as a means toward economic development. The representation of education as an economic issue suggests a recontextualization of educational discourse. This recontextualization can be observed at various levels of social structuring. In this section, I will explain such a recontextualization as I comment on various discourses from prominent politicians, scholars, and community college leaders.

The discussion begins with the Clinton administration. When speaking at Miami-Dade Community College in 1996, President Clinton positioned market demands as the driver of educational programming in community colleges:

If you just think about it, this is not a bureaucratic organization, it's a flexible, creative organization. You change from year to year the programs you offer. And you have to meet a high standard of excellence, otherwise you'll be punished for what you don't know in the marketplace. (Office of the Press Secretary, 1996)



As this statement makes clear, Clinton is directing the community college with continuously realigning its programming to the impulses of the market. In this way, the community college abandons its commitment to community-based programming as planned through democratic processes (Boone, 1992) and instead becomes a servant of unfettered, free-market capitalism.

In his 2004 State of the Union Address, President George W. Bush reproduced this discourse when he pledged "support for America's community colleges to train workers for the industries that are creating the most new jobs" (State of the Union, 2004). The following day, Bush provided more information on this initiative in a speech at Owens Community College in Ohio. In this speech, Bush referred to the provost as the "guy who is responsible for making sure the curriculum actually adjusts and doesn't stay stuck." He further added, "If you're in the local community, you've got to ask this question to a provost, are you flexible? [Laughter.] In other words, if somebody shows up and says, we've got a demand for jobs, will the community college adjust?" (Office of the Press Secretary, 2004). Once again in connecting educational programming with the shifting markets, discursive practices portray the community college as a reactive institution that is dependent on market activity for its curriculum. Furthermore, the initiative Bush mentions will be managed, not by the Department of Education, but instead by the Department of Labor. The community college thus fulfills a purely economic role.

Furthermore, in the third presidential debate in 2004 President Bush responded to a question about the economy and job creation in purely educational terms. When asked how he would speak to an individual who had just lost his job, Bush responded:

You know, there's a lot of talk about how to keep the economy growing. We talk about fiscal matters. But perhaps the best way to keep jobs here in America and to keep this economy growing is to make sure our education system works. . . . Education is how to make sure we've got a workforce that's productive and competitive. And so the person you talked to, I say, here's some help, here's some trade adjustment assistance money for you to go a community college in your neighborhood, a community college which is providing the skills necessary to fill the jobs of the 21st century. (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2004)

With these comments, the boundaries between educational and economic policy are razed. Government becomes responsible for unemployment only through its involvement in education. Consequently, the community college is reduced to an arm of economic policy, and other responsibilities traditionally associated with postsecondary education such as intellectual and social development become secondary.

As stated above, neoliberal ideology holds that the government should act in support of business and industry as a way of protecting national economic interests. One way of promoting a healthy business climate, therefore, is to allocate government resources toward the production of human capital, and this is achieved to a great extent through community college education. Researchers Anthony Carnevale and Donna Desrochers (2001) acknowledge the role of the community college in providing human capital for employers, equating developing relationships between community college educators and employers with an "ongoing restructuring of the human capital development system" (p. 11). Indeed, through collaboration with members of the corporate world, community colleges nationwide are demonstrating increasing commitment to the

production of human capital for accumulation by private enterprise (Zeiss, 1997). Reproducing the neoliberal principle that government activity should be limited to establishing a favorable business climate, Carnevale and Desrochers advocate community college education as a means of benefiting private enterprise at the public's expense: "We cannot expect employers to carry the costs of the growing need for career development among employed workers" (qtd. in Zeiss, 1997, p. viii).

Furthermore, representing the community college's focus on human capital development, the North Carolina Community College System has adopted the slogan, "preparing North Carolina's world-class workforce," and the University and Community College System of Nevada claims that the community college mission "encompasses a belief that education and training are the chief means of developing human capital for investment in the economic health of the state" Finally P. Anthony Zeiss (1997) recommends that "community college leaders, including trustees, should strongly consider positioning workforce development as a core mission" (p. 102). This discussion of the human capital development role of the community college exemplifies how the discourse of economics has colonized the discourse of higher learning.

The discourse above demonstrates the involvement of political leaders at the highest level, prominent researchers, and community college leaders in refashioning the purpose of education from one of cognitive and intellectual, spiritual, moral, and personal development to one of human capital development; thus, the learner is reduced to an economic entity (Levin, 2001). As represented through this discourse, the community college itself is instrumental in reproducing inequality. As such, the community college is complicit in what Joel Spring (1998) describes as the chasm between the nation's richest and its poorest citizens. In other words, the income of the wealthy has increased while the income of the poor has decreased, and this consequence of neoliberalism is both reflected and reinforced through the mission and impacts of the community college, at least to the extent that it is represented in purely economic terms.

## THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF INEQUALITY AT THE LEVEL OF THE INSTITUTION

### *The Analytical Process*

As part of a larger project, I gathered a systematic sample of 144 institutions located in the United States that are currently members of the American Association of Community Colleges. I retrieved mission statements—including statements of philosophy, purpose, goals, and objectives, as available—from the internet sites of each institution. With the analytical framework described above in mind, I examined these mission statements in search of discursive manifestations of human capital theory and neoliberal ideology. I subjected these ideological-discursive practices to semiotic and linguistic analyses with particular attention to evidence of recontextualization. Through this analytical process, two prominent ideological effects emerged. I present below the linguistic analysis and the ideological effects of neoliberal discourse as represented in these community college mission statements, illustrated by examples from these mission statements.

The first set of discursive practices revealed by this analysis yields the ideological effect of reducing learners to an economic entity whose responsibility to society is "to please employers" so that business and industry may remain competitive in the global economy. The second set of

ideological effects revealed in this analysis is closely related. It deals with the restructuring of the curriculum so that it accommodates the demands of business and industry as they respond to the irregularities of the market. Through these discursive practices, education is justified primarily by its effect on economic conditions. In effect, both sets of discursive practices naturalize the incursion of neoliberal ideology into the domain of postsecondary learning in ways that reinforce and reproduce the differential distribution of power and other social goods in advanced capitalist societies.

### *The Learner as an Economic Entity*

Reflecting and reinforcing the neoliberal social order in late modernity, the first set of discursive practices in the corpus of community college mission statements reduces the learner to human capital, an economic entity whose only role in society is to remain competitive in a perpetually adjusting labor market. Table 1 presents examples of such discursive practices, and a critical analysis follows.

Selection 1 is taken from a list of college goals. Within the foreground of this excerpt, the stated goal is to develop the economy. This discourse, typically associated with economics, may seem unnatural within the mission of an educational institution, but it is naturalized here in that its end is said to be achieved through an array of educational programs. The intended outcome is economic competitiveness, a responsibility that is said to be shouldered by both individuals and private enterprise. Because the language restricts the educational needs of individuals to those that intersect the goal of economic competitiveness, the excerpt constrains the individual to an economic role. Learning needs relating to non-economic fields are not addressed. This discursive practice holds individuals and business and industry accountable only to their economic performance. Moral and ethical responsibilities to family, community, and democratic society are therefore excluded.

Selection 2 presents one item from a listing of educational programs offered at a community college in Indiana. The human subjects in this example—the learners—are directed to meet three obligations. The first is to meet individual needs. In the form of self-advocacy and an ethical pursuit of improved quality of life, this responsibility possibly relates to justice and democracy. A focus on individual needs may also reflect a doctrine of Machiavellianism. In this excerpt, there is no mention of ethical responsibility or obligation to that which exists beyond the self.

The following two goals do, in fact, indicate an obligation to a social collective, but this responsibility is defined in entirely economic terms. First, the student exists to meet the needs of the employers. This language assembles hierarchical power relations between learners and employers; it subordinates learners to employers. Second, the student exists as a subsystem of advanced capitalism whose responsibility to society is purely economic. Conspicuously absent from the mention of duty to society is the obligation of public service and participation in the democratic process.

I retrieved the third excerpt from a statement of philosophy. Until the final clause of this selection, the language reflects community college traditions such as open access, affordability, and learning throughout the lifespan. This language seems to represent a comprehensive educational agenda. The final clause, however, severely limits the purpose of educational

programs. That is, the clause "as it participates in the global economy" restricts the focus of educational programs to its nexus with society's economic sphere. This clause renders all other possible learning objectives—particularly those in the public sphere (Giroux, 2001) imperceptible.

The fourth excerpt in Table 1 also positions learners as inferior to employers. Appearing in the foreground are the business and service sectors, which are explicitly identified as the beneficiaries of the community college enterprise. Relegated to the background is the reference to employees, who are positioned as human capital to be controlled by business and industry. This language portrays students as passive subjects whose only important needs are those consistent with the needs of private enterprise. This language also reflects and reinforces a passive role for learners and their communities in the planning, design, implementation, and evaluation of educational programs. Once again, the needs of learners and their communities are seen as inferior to the needs of employers.

The fifth selection is extracted from a list of institutional goals. This selection is a component of a local community college mission statement but is derived from the general Massachusetts Community College mission statement. The initial clause identifies community colleges as an integral component of the state system of higher education. Six subsequent gerund clauses detail how community colleges operationalize their service to the public system of higher education. Extracted from this list, Selection 5 demonstrates the role of language in positioning the student as an economic entity with the purpose of serving private enterprise. In the foreground is a commitment to serve the needs of business and industry through partnerships.

Following the initial gerund clause, an infinitive clause lists the purposes of such partnerships as "to provide job training, retraining, and skills improvement. . . ." The choice of the words "skills improvement," a nominalization, seems awkward. It renders the learner conspicuously absent. By choosing a nominalization, or the use of a noun to represent an action, the producers of this text are able to erase all recognition of learners as individuals (Fairclough, 1995). This impersonal reference to the learner parallels another impersonal reference in a subsequent clause. That is, the second infinitive clause cites the purpose of educational programming as to "provide a workforce equipped to meet the needs of a changing economy." The reference to learners as "a workforce" is common in community college mission statements, and it reduces the needs of learners to those deemed important by employers. By implication, the learner's purpose is to please future employers and learning needs tangential to this purpose are irrelevant.

In these examples, the discourse of economics colonizes the discourse of pedagogy. Because individual citizens are empowered only to meet the needs of employers and to promote their own self-interest, they fail to develop the critical citizenship skills that are requisite to a democratic society. Under such circumstances, a naive and acquiescent society may develop, deferring political decision making to an elite class of politicians who claim to act in the universal interest of a homogenous populace.

### *The Market-Driven Curriculum*

A second theme relating to the development of human capital is language that escalates the market's role in determining educational objectives. The function of business and industry within

this discourse strand is to make meaning of the erratic and ever-changing whims of the market. The resulting interpretations of market activity become the building blocks of the curriculum. As a result, curriculum foundations emanate from semiotic endeavors of business and industry representatives. Following discourse theory, these individuals make meaning of market activity through language and discourse; and because all discourse is laden with ideology, the resulting educational programs are likely to facilitate ideological indoctrination. The set of discursive practices analyzed below fails to recognize the needs of the community in the planning, design, and evaluation of educational programs.

Table 2 presents typical ideological discursive practices from representative texts in the corpus of mission statements. The first selection is extracted from a list of college purposes. It presents a string of three clauses. The first clause states one college purpose, which is economic development. The second clause identifies the means through which the goal is to be achieved, which is a collaboration or a partnership with business and industry. The human agents responsible for promoting economic development thus become community college educators and representatives from private enterprise. In the third clause, the purpose of the partnership is identified as restructuring occupational program offerings as dictated by the "job market." Thus, the market provides the rationale behind the renewal, creation, evaluation, or termination of educational programs. Accordingly, community college educators and business and industry representatives function simply to interpret market activity as they plan, design, implement, and evaluate educational programs.

Also in the first selection, the goals statement contains the two sequential prepositional phrases: "with the needs of the job market." In this excerpt, the market is personified with the human quality of having needs. As Norman Fairclough (1995) points out, this discursive practice suggests that the market is the agent of change and that human agents are not. By implication, if human actors are not responsible for curricular change, then the tyranny of the market is, by default, a natural phenomenon that cannot be contested any more than bad weather can be contested. This language not only portrays change as an inevitability but also releases human actors from ethical responsibility for policies and practices that perpetuate distributive injustice and social inequality.

The second selection is extracted from a list of institutional objectives. The objective in focus in this excerpt is curriculum. It portrays the learners as passive, economic entities who exist to meet the demands of industry. The noun phrase in the foreground is "academic opportunities," which can refer to a wide variety of learning experiences. However, this array of possibilities is greatly restricted by the subsequent clause. Only the learning experiences that meet the needs of industry are deemed relevant; therefore, industry determines which skills, knowledge, and dispositions will be addressed through the curriculum. Once again, positioning industry representatives as the ultimate legitimators of knowledge invites an inculcation of market ideology into the learning experience. Finally, the needs of industry are described as "changing," which provides justification for constant disruptions in educational programming based on employers' preferences. From a different point of view, however, this practice indicates the short-term value of narrowly focused educational programs designed to meet specific production demands.

The third selection in Table 2 comes from a list of goals and strategic imperatives. The heading limits the described action to the economic and workforce development mission of the college. As is common within this discourse strand, the learners are dehumanized and referred to as a collective, in this case "the workforce." This discursive practice depicts a group of learners as a single entity with homogenous needs. It furthermore reflects and reinforces an industrial frame of mind that favors the standardization of components in the production process. Also, there is no acknowledgment that each individual learner may have unique needs nor that the needs of the individual may be markedly different from those of the employer. As in the example above, the genesis of curricular change is portrayed as a nonhuman entity: in this case, "the new economy." The effect is the same, however; societal changes that accommodate shifting markets and the demands of business and industry are portrayed as an innate, common-sense responses to natural phenomena. It is implied that, if the new economy is a force of nature, then it has no human agents and that the advanced capitalist economy is something that society must accommodate without question. As McKenna (2004) argues, blind acceptance of the status quo feeds power to an ideology and its proponents. However, the proponents of neoliberalism who are responsible for the new economy and its resultant social inequality are invisible in this text.

The fourth selection delineates one purpose of several of an Illinois community college. As in the examples above, the needs of the learner—or even that individual learners may have unique needs—are not acknowledged. What is acknowledged is that local, regional, and national labor markets are changing and that the role of educational programs is to accommodate these market vagaries. Once again, this language positions a nonhuman entity, the market, in control of the curriculum.

The final selection comes from a list of objectives of a Maryland community college. Its description of the purpose of educational programming is simply to benefit business, government, and industry. Educational programs are said to be specially tailored to the needs of external organizations. The needs of the learner are deemed irrelevant by virtue of their absence in the stated objective. Furthermore, the college and its faculty are reduced to a consultative role. As with the above excerpts from community college mission statements, this example positions noneducational entities as the primary designers of curricula.

In the above discourse fragments, control of the curriculum is placed largely within the domain of business and industry. That is, representatives of business and industry, although at times in concert with community college educators, are granted dominion over the curriculum in certain community college programs. As a result, the discourse of economics reconstitutes the meaning of education; the value and legitimacy of knowledge are determined purely by their market value. Noncommodified knowledge, skills, and wisdom addressed through civic and liberal education migrate from the core of higher education to a distant periphery (Engel, 2000; Giroux, 2001; Levin, 2001).

## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, discourses promulgated by high-level politicians, scholars, community college leaders, and even community college mission statements demonstrate the recontextualization of the educational process by economic processes and their neoliberal ideological basis. In effect, the representation of community college education through neoliberal discourse (a) subordinates

workers/learners to employers, thereby constituting identities of servitude, and (b) displaces the community and faculty in planning educational programs, placing instead representatives of business and industry as the chief designers of curricula.

This analysis supports Burton Clark (1960), Jerome Karabel (1972), and L. Steven Zwerling (1976) and other critics whose works describe the community college as an institution that serves the interests of the elite to the detriment of learners and workers. This analysis also parallels John Levin's (2001) claims that, in the 1990s, (a) community colleges shifted their focus from meeting the needs of learners to meeting the needs of business and industry, (b) the mission of the community college has become focused on economic ends rather than educational ends, and (c) that this transformation has occurred at the learner's expense.

The narrow educational focus on economic development is alarming because it places the market in control of the curriculum and because, as Engel (2000) states, "If the market is making the big decisions about the direction of education, then the community is not" (p. 30). One danger of this development is that the curriculum is likely to become heavily laden with a market ideology that reinforces and reproduces power asymmetries among learners, their communities, faculty, and representatives of the private sector. The colonization of the community college mission by a neoliberal regime should therefore arouse trepidation among functionalist advocates who view "the People's college" as a democratic institution that empowers individual learners and communities from all segments of society. The colonization of educational discourse by a neoliberal discourse is also troublesome because "the markets do not reward moral behavior" (Giroux, 2001, p. 32). On the contrary, the tyranny of the markets emphasizes "profit over people" as Chomsky (1999) asserts in the title of his book on neoliberalism and the global order. Finally, Giroux and Giroux (2004) summarize the consequences of the rising dominion of neoliberalism: "In short, private interests trump social needs, and economic growth becomes more important than social justice" (p. 250).

The community college mission is much more extensive than that represented in neoliberal discourses. In many instances, community college mission statements explicitly uphold the community college as an institution committed to democracy and justice. In his work on community-based programming, Edgar Boone (1992) points out that the community college occupies a unique position in society: With its close proximity to the people, the community college is capable of engaging individuals across America's communities in democratic decision-making processes that enhance community development. In this way, progress is not defined purely in terms of corporate interests but instead by the broad interests of a diverse society. Through community-based programming, individuals of different means have an equal voice in determining their shared future. Although empowering individuals with a voice equal to that of business and industry is quite the antithesis of neoliberal ideology, it is the basis of participatory democracy.

Community-based programming and civic programs such as service learning are gaining momentum within the community college, suggesting that, even though the neoliberal ideological norms of late modernity have permeated the discourse of community college education, this permeation is neither absolute nor universal. Perhaps the manifestations of neoliberalism in community college mission statements represent only one ideological discursive

formation (Fairclough, 1995) within the institution. If so, then the evolution of the community college mission is both a semiotic endeavor and an ideological struggle between competing discourse regimes. Given this struggle, if the community college is to realize its egalitarian mission then functionalist advocates must mount alternatives to the discourse of neoliberalism. To the degree that alternative discourses are available, hegemony dissipates into choice, and this invites resistance to domination and oppression.

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