

Resisting Excellence: Challenging Neoliberal Ideology in Postsecondary Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to challenge the commonsensical acceptance of commitments to excellence within postsecondary education and reveal their inherent neoliberal foundation. Because excellence appears neutral, natural, universal, and a legitimate educational goal, it obfuscates the embedded assumptions that undergird the material practices associated with performances of excellence. These assumptions include the quantification and commensurability of learning, teaching, and scholarship, the necessity of assessment and legitimation of accountability regimes, and the naturalness and universality of competition within postsecondary education. The acceptance of excellence as an organizing frame of the university has enabled much of the neoliberalization of postsecondary education in the United States, and as such, to resist the neoliberalization of postsecondary education, we must challenge its commitment to excellence.

Keywords: *excellence, neoliberalism, ideology*

Introduction

Over the past thirty years, colleges and universities in the United States have increasingly embraced an economic rationality in virtually all educational processes, leading to the neoliberalization of postsecondary education throughout the country. Allegedly beginning from the need to recover funds that were lost due to drastic cuts in real-dollar state allocations stemming from a broader neoliberal shift in governing, public institutions argued they had no alternative to this new neoliberal educational paradigm (Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Increased competition among private colleges and universities allegedly required a similar adjustment to maintain their functionality (Hill, 2003; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). As economic rationality spread into colleges and universities, institutions came to focus on efficiency, accountability, revenue generation, and job training (Alexander, 2001; Ayers, 2005; Levin, 2005; McLaren, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, Tierney, 1998), and students became viewed primarily as customers whose main purpose is to enhance their human capital (Saunders, 2014). With the neoliberal belief that the “market” is an all-knowing information processor undergirding institutional actions (Mirowski, 2013), what was efficient was necessarily understood as educationally beneficial, what generated revenue was necessarily viewed as educationally meaningful, and prioritizing job training was necessarily the most empowering thing an educator can do.

In the name of efficiency, the neoliberal university came to rely on a substantial number of part-time and adjunct faculty members (Aronowitz, 2000; Rhoades, 2006) while simultaneously reducing its percentage of tenure-track positions. The prioritization of efficiency also led to the use of hierarchical forms of decision making, which reduced the influence of faculty and students in systems of shared governance (Currie, 1998; Gumport, 1993). The institutional focus on revenue generation brought upon shifts in academic priorities, with sciences, engineering, and other potentially “profitable” aspects of the institution receiving increased institutional support, while departments in the humanities and fine arts faced retraction or diminishing percentages of full-time, tenure-track faculty (Slaughter, 1998; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Further, the neoliberal university came to view faculty primarily as entrepreneurs (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), whose research should generate revenue, whose course materials (if the faculty member is not able to “buy out” his or her courses) are products that can be commercialized, and whose “service” should include close ties with businesses and corporations (Powers, 2003;

Washburn, 2006). Just like workers in a corporation, faculty are supposed to continually justify their existence based on economic terms. Such logic was expressed in the University of Texas State System task force on “productivity and excellence,” whose report detailed the salaries, course loads, and grant activities of each professor, by name (June, 2011), in a way similar to a previous Texas A&M report that attributed each faculty member with a net monetary loss or gain (Mangan, 2010).

As seen through the University of Texas System report, productivity in the neoliberal university is tightly coupled with the idea of “excellence.” Readings (1996) drew attention to this coupling around the same time Slaughter and Leslie (1999) were discussing the rise of academic capitalism. While Slaughter and Leslie were articulating the behaviors and characteristics of the neoliberal university, Readings was focused on the ways in which the university made and found meaning. During a period of substantial institutional transitions throughout the late twentieth century in which administrators, faculty, students, and policy makers appeared to have different ideas concerning the future of higher education, excellence was one thing on which everyone could agree (Readings, 1996). The behaviors and priorities of all institutional actors were unified under the common cause of excellence, and the university gained both internal and external meaning through its commitment to excellence.

As Apple (2004), drawing upon Gramsci and Williams, states, “to gain insight, to understand the activity of men and women of a specific historical period, one must start out by questioning what to them is unquestionable” (p.12). Currently, commitments to excellence occupy a largely unquestioned space in postsecondary education. The purpose of this paper is to challenge the commonsensical acceptance of excellence within postsecondary education and reveal its inherent neoliberal foundation. Based on Eagleton’s (2007) work on ideology, I argue that because excellence appears neutral, natural, universal, and a legitimate educational goal, it obfuscates the embedded assumptions that

undergird the material practices associated with performances of excellence. These assumptions include the quantification and commensurability of learning, teaching, and scholarship, the necessity of assessment and legitimation of accountability regimes, and the naturalness and universality of competition within postsecondary education. Such assumptions are consistent with neoliberal ideology (Brown, 2015; Mirowski, 2013), and the acceptance of excellence as an organizing frame of the university has enabled much of the neoliberalization of postsecondary education in the United States. As such, to resist the neoliberalization of postsecondary education, we must challenge its commitment to excellence.

Understanding Ideology

Terry Eagleton (2007) begins his book, *Ideology: An introduction* with the statement, "nobody has yet come up with a single adequate definition of ideology, and this book will be no exception" (p. 1). He argues that the inability to settle on a singular understanding of ideology stems from the term having numerous historical and currently useful meanings, many of which are in tension, and all of which are not reducible to a single meta-construct. That said, an argument based, in part, on ideology needs to have a clear operational definition of the term. In this paper, I borrow Eagleton's broad definition of ideology "as a body of meanings and values encoding certain interests relevant to social power...that are *unifying, action-oriented, rationalizing, legitimating, universalizing, and naturalizing*" (p. 45) and aimed at reproducing the social relations necessary for particular formations of social power.

Ideologies must at least partially correspond to individuals' lived experiences, and while they may obfuscate the internal logics of, and material manifestations brought upon by, a particular social power, ideologies do not impose a completely false consciousness on a mindless populace (Rehmann, 2013). Instead, they provide structure and define meaning within people's day-to-day lives in an apparently neutral and natural way, even if such structures

and meanings may be antithetical to the interests of those who believe in the ideology (Apple, 2004). While dominant ideologies may appear to be comprehensive, consistent, and static, and while words like "saturation" and "common sense" suggests they are so, ideologies are always partial and incomplete, and are always changing in response to various challenges and resistance (Eagleton, 2007). The rationalizing, legitimizing, and naturalizing that Eagleton describes are essential tactics in ideology's¹ attempt to overcome such resistance.

Additionally, while common understandings of ideology define it as a body of doctrine or system of beliefs, ideologies are necessarily material (Rehmann, 2013). The meanings and values within an ideology are expressed through actions, which are then inserted into practices. Althusser (2012) states, "These practices are governed by rituals in which these practices are inscribed, within the material existence of an ideological apparatus, be it only a small part of that apparatus" (p.127). As such, the common sense understandings informed by ideology are only possible through our engagement with certain material practices.

One such space of ideological engagement and dissemination is education. Althusser (2012) believed education² to be the dominant ideological state apparatus, as it benefited from obligatory attendance of all children and young adults. Given such an engagement, schooling is able to help instill habits, behaviors, and beliefs that work in concert to create certain "legitimate" knowledge (Apple, 2004). While this knowledge is authentic to specific dominant groups, which in the United States are White, male, and economically well-off, the processes of schooling transforms it to appear as knowledge for all. Further, the educational processes that help instill ideological understandings are not located solely in the curriculum and assessments. Instead, the pedagogical practices utilized within the classroom, what is not included in the curriculum, and what is not tested combine to create a "hidden" curriculum that works in concert with overt educational practices to create saturate individuals' commonsensical understandings. As Apple (2004) states,

“The idea that ideological saturation permeates our lived experience enables one to see how people can employ frameworks which both assist them in organizing their world and enable them to believe they are neutral participants in the neutral instrumentation of schooling, while, at the same time, these frameworks serve particular economic and ideological interests that are hidden from them.” (p. 20).

While Althusser and Apple mainly discuss ideology in relation to students, their analysis is also applicable for those who work within educational institutions. Giroux’s (1988) discussion of the autonomization of teachers’ work, Bousquet’s (2008) investigations on the conditions facing staff and faculty in postsecondary education, and Slaughter and Rhoades’ (2004) work on the priorities of the neoliberal university all demonstrate particular manifestations of legitimate knowledge concerning educators’ work. Beyond the fact that many educators have had upwards of twenty years of formal schooling in which they were the targets of the ideological indoctrination Althusser and Apple discuss, mandatory meetings, “professional development,” and formal evaluations act on educators in ways similar to that of curriculum and assessments on students. As such, educators are both the targets and performers of a series of ideological practices and rituals. For the past three decades, many of these practices and rituals are consistent with neoliberalism.

Defining Neoliberalism

To borrow from Eagleton (2007), no one has yet to come up with a singular definition of neoliberalism, and this article will be no exception. Ranging from describing it as a complete dominant force seemingly responsible for everything and anything objectionable in our world, to denying its existence, scholarship on neoliberalism is rarely lauded for being clear or consistent (Peck, 2013). Yet, just as forcing a singular definition of ideology unnecessarily removes important conceptual and political contributions concerning socio-economic power and reproduction,

attempting to reduce neoliberalism to a singular concept threatens to do the same.

Authors such as Harvey (2005), Giroux (2014), and Klein (2008) who describe neoliberalism as the global hegemonic project appropriately identify substantial empirical evidence suggesting processes of neoliberalization are occurring throughout social, political, economic, and cultural spaces across the globe. However, these accounts often gloss over the inherent contradictions and local differences within the alleged singular neoliberal project, as well as the meaningful resistance against neoliberalization (Peck, 2013). Those embracing more of a poststructuralist approach to neoliberalism, including Castree (2006) and Barnett (2005), rightly point to the contextual and contradictory nature of neoliberal manifestations and the potential dangers in treating neoliberalism as a completely dominant monolithic force, yet fail to recognize the common threads running through a number of political, economic, social, and cultural transformations that have been widely documented (Peck, 2013). In general, the former accounts of neoliberalism come at the expense of local and nuanced investigations of the various processes of neoliberalization, and latter accounts come at the expense of “the commonalities and connections across (‘local’) neoliberalisms” (Peck, 2013, p. 142).

The more local investigations showing the contradictions and unevenness of neoliberalism(s), combined with the generalist investigations showing commonalities within this unevenness, indicate that the neoliberal project should be understood as an ideological one (Cahill, 2012). As Cahill describes, “When read as an ideology, a clearer picture can be formed of the relationship between neoliberal doctrine and the practices which have generally been labelled ‘neoliberal’ (p. 177). When we understand neoliberalism as an ideology, the contradictions poststructuralist scholars observe are expected and necessary, as all ideologies are incomplete and riddled with tensions. Simultaneously, the meaningfully different contexts and manifestations of neoliberalism which express these

contradictions are unified through the commonalities identified by generalist approaches.

Neoliberal ideology is, foremost, grounded in the extension of free-market logic to the social, cultural, and political spheres (Lemke, 2001; Mirowski, 2013). As Brown (2015) states,

“Neoliberalism does not merely privatize – turn over to the market for individual production and consumption – what was formerly publicly supported and valued. Rather, it formulates everything, everywhere, in terms of capital investment and appreciation, including and especially humans themselves” (p. 176).

This formulation is undergirded by an extreme focus on competition (Mirowski, 2013), the prioritization of profits and its accompanying focus on accounting, quantification, and measurement (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), and an understanding of individuals as autonomous, rational, economic actors (Brown, 2015).

Extending free-market logic to the social, cultural, and political spheres masks the inherent conflicts within neoliberalism, as universally, everything operates under the same market rule. Being natural and universal, outcomes of our market-based world are necessarily legitimate, and any performances of neoliberal ideology that manifest devastating consequences are rationalized as necessary consequences of a free world (Mirowski, 2013). Lastly, neoliberal ideology gains a material existence through a series of actions, which are inserted into practices and then ritualized within various institutions, including those associated with postsecondary education. As discussed in the introduction of this paper, the actions, practices, and rituals within the neoliberal university are united through a commitment to excellence. I contend that such a commitment is neoliberal, both in its inherent assumptions and in its particular performances.

Excellence as Ideology in Higher Education

Readings (1996) discussed a commitment to excellence in U.S. postsecondary education throughout the late 20th century as occurring alongside the emergence of the neoliberal university (he used the terms "bureaucratic system" and discussed it as operating according to an economic rationality, which I understand to be very similar to that of the neoliberal university). He detailed, at length, instances of commitments to excellence in the 1990's, and such messages continue to be ubiquitous in many institutions today. One simply has to search for "excellence and [insert any postsecondary institution name]" and results abound. For example, a search at the university where I work reveals that the institution has a number of "Organized Research Centers of Excellence," holds an "Annual Celebration of Excellence by Students," and its regents' award faculty for "excellence in the classroom." The same search of websites at university where I was both an undergraduate and graduate student, an institution which is located 2,000 miles away from where I currently work and has a meaningfully different history and student and faculty populations, reveals that the Honors College graduation is called the "Celebration of Excellence," the Chancellor articulated a fundamental goal of the institution as "to match the excellence of the public universities that are members of the prestigious Association of American Universities (AAU)," and articulates how this will be achieved through what he calls a "Framework for Excellence," and the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning and the College of Engineering have dedicated web pages for "faculty excellence." As seen through these examples, excellence acts as a unifying force within each institution, bringing together students, faculty, and administration under a singular idea. Further, excellence acts a bridge between the institutions, suggesting that seemingly disparate institutions are connected through a shared commitment to excellence.

Commitments to excellence are part of a broader emphasis concerning quality in postsecondary education. For the past thirty years institutions and governmental actors created complex

systems of quality “assurance,” and scholars have created an entire body of literature focusing on ways to measure, describe, and enhance quality in higher education (Harvey & Williams, 2010). It is reasonable that those funding postsecondary education would want that education to be as high quality as possible, and it is difficult to get much better than “excellent.” As Readings (1996) discussed, students, faculty, administrators, and policy makers may disagree over the appropriate role, purpose, and actions an institution should take, but they all agree that whatever is done, it should be done excellently.

Such commitments to excellence have become commonsensical to educators, and that is precisely why we must interrogate them. When we begin to question institutional commitments to excellence, what appears to be a laudable goal is revealed to represent a body of meanings and values encoding neoliberal interests. As such, invoking Eagleton (2007), I argue that commitments to excellence should be understood as ideological tools of neoliberalism.

Commitments to excellence begin to fall apart as soon as we recognize that excellence is non-referential; it reflects a particular measurement of a thing, and it is not a thing itself that can be measured (Readings, 1996). We cannot create excellence, but we can create artifacts, ideas, and performances that are understood within our community as excellent. As such, “excellence has the singular advantage of being entirely meaningless” (Readings, 1996, p. 22), and a university committed to excellence is necessarily committed not to specific thing, but only to a particular measurement of the things institutional actors create.

Further, as Readings (1996) discussed, “excellence is not a fixed standard of judgment, but a qualifier whose meaning is fixed in relation to something else” (p 24.). Excellence is only comprehensible after it has been operationalized, and that operationalization is contextual. Readings continues, “An excellent boat is not excellent by the same criteria as an excellent

plane (p. 24),” and the “excellence” of the boat indicates little outside of the context in which the boat will operate. A boat that is created for fishing in small lakes is different than boat that is created to sail across the Atlantic Ocean, and neither would be excellent at accomplishing the other’s purpose. Further, understandings of excellence often change, as an excellent boat created in 1500 to sail across the Atlantic Ocean would not be viewed as excellent for the same purpose in our current world. As such, we can only understand excellence within a particular space and time, which challenges the unifying force excellence holds within postsecondary education. Additionally, the relational nature of excellence suggests that, by definition, not everything can be excellent. As a result, institutional commitments to excellence are not only meaningless unto themselves and impossible to understand outside of their particular context, but it is impossible for every institution committed to excellence to realize their commitment.

We are left with a conundrum: Everything in postsecondary education is supposed to be excellent, but excellence is nothing in and of itself and by definition not everything can be excellent. It is this tension – that everything is or can be excellent and that excellence is nothing – that I argue allows for the neoliberal university to perform its ideological functions. Using Eagleton’s framework, excellence appears to have ideological characteristics within postsecondary education. Excellence is clearly unifying, as it, at least in part, defines the goals of virtually every aspect of the university. A commitment to excellence appears natural and universal, as we all should strive to be the best at what we do and possible have a responsibility to our students and taxpayers to do so. Realizing excellence is the fundamental rationalization for institutional actions, and since it is natural and universal, all one has to say is that we are committed to excellence and actions based on that commitment are legitimate. However, a more detailed investigation of the assumptions undergirding excellence in postsecondary education, as well as manifestations of excellence within and across colleges and universities, will demonstrate commitments to excellence create a very specific,

narrowly-defined, and undemocratically determined world of postsecondary education that is best described as neoliberal.

Excellence as Neoliberal Ideological Practice

As Readings (1996) appropriately discusses, excellence has no content in and of itself. The “meaninglessness” of excellence led him to believe that excellence is non-ideological, as it alone cannot further a particular set of ideas or beliefs. Yet, as Eagleton (2007) describes, ideology is not only a system of beliefs, but instead a system of strategies and tactics that lead to the commonplace acceptance of a particular system of beliefs. As such, the seeming emptiness of excellence should be understood as enabling the broader neoliberalization of postsecondary education. Appearing as a laudable educational goal, commitments to excellence work to foster consent to a series of embedded and obfuscated assumptions that are inherently neoliberal, including the quantification and commensurability of all educational work and outcomes, the necessity of widespread assessment and accountability regimes, the extension of competition within all aspects of postsecondary education, and the beneficence of the “free market” as the arbiter of quality. These assumptions would have and continue to be more actively resisted if presented independent of such a seemingly benevolent ideal.

To begin, excellence is a measure, and any commitment to excellence necessarily requires mechanisms to measure the things that are aiming to be excellent. Since everything in the university is supposed to be excellent, everything must be measured. And since excellence is a relational measure, everything must be measured using a consistent and comparable system, no matter how inadequate those systems may be (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Given the inherent incommensurability of qualitative approaches to measuring quality, commitments to excellence require that every educational activity be quantifiable. This approach reduces creative and complex educational processes and outcomes to crude,

quantitative measures. Excellent learning is understood through high grades, excellent teaching is understood through high course evaluations, excellent entering students have high SAT/ACT scores, and excellent institutions have large endowments and high national and international rankings (Tam, 2001). Of course, these are all crude indicators of complex processes, as they reduce our understandings of students and faculty to simple numeric expressions.

Not only does this quantification necessarily challenge emancipatory educational practices that are built upon the recognition of students and faculty as nuanced, multidimensional people who are irreducible with one another (Freire, 2000; Illich, 1971), but it limits the potential for new, non-quantitatively based pedagogical practices and educational priorities. Such measurement and its corresponding closing off of alternative approaches is a foundation of the neoliberalization of postsecondary education, as everything within a neoliberal world is commensurable with one another and subject to quantitative measures (Brown, 2015). As such, to embrace a commitment to excellence is to naturalize and universalize the quantification of postsecondary education and to accept a core tenet of neoliberal ideology.

Once excellence is accepted as a primary educational goal, institutions must ensure that the goal is met. To do so requires building upon the quantification of all education-related activities and placing them within assessment regimes. After all, excellence is only realized after it is measured, and after those measures are compared to one another. Since excellence is the goal of all educational activities, it naturally follows that the institution must be committed to ensuring such excellence exists. As a result, the focus of education shifts from creating meaningful and impactful educational experiences to measuring if those experiences exist. For example, Boud and Falchikov (2007) state, "assessment, rather than teaching, has a major influence on students' learning" (p. 3). Such a statement epitomizes the need to quantitatively measure and make commensurable

everything that occurs within postsecondary education, and prioritizes the measurement of educational outcomes over the outcomes themselves.

Further, the naturalization and universality of assessment removes important questions concerning the undemocratic and asymmetrical power relations that shape the parameters of such assessments. Questions concerning who determines what is excellent become secondary to technical questions concerning the reliability and validity of assessment techniques. Redefining questions of social relations into procedural issues with technical solutions is a hallmark of neoliberal ideology (Brown, 2015), and naturalizing assessment regimes within postsecondary education reinforces such a redefinition.

Assessment regimes are aimed at demonstrating institutional goals are met, and are only effective if there are consequences for achieving or not achieving such goals. In this way, assessment is a tool in larger accountability regimes aimed at satisfying expectations of both internal constituencies and external actors, largely state and federal institutions (Astin & Antonio, 2012) that are unabashedly neoliberal. The previously mentioned University of Texas State System task force on “productivity and excellence” provides an example of the relationship between quantitative measurements, assessment regimes, and accountability. Stemming from an alleged problem concerning faculty “productivity,” which should be understood as part of the general neoliberal assault on public employees and institutions, “Lawmakers, in particular, [were] looking for evidence that professors are doing enough work to justify their salaries” (June, 2011, para. 4). As June reported, faculty work was defined course-enrollments, course loads, grant money individual faculty members brought into their institution the previous year, the average grade awarded by the faculty member across all classes, how much time each faculty member spent on research and teaching (as defined by the terms of their employment), and their average student evaluation score.

This crude assessment of faculty productivity is consistent with neoliberal ideology, as all activity is eventually reducible to a monetary representation, and all workers must justify their salary through the creation of profit (Mirowski, 2013). While there were no specific outcomes stemming from one's "cost-effectiveness," the report specifically spoke to enhancing accountability efforts and worked to reinforce more local accountability regimes (in the form of tenure and renewal decisions) that target faculty members whose work does not correspond to neoliberal understandings of the role and processes of postsecondary education (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Faculty did speak out against the report, but their resistance largely focused on what measures of faculty work were and were not included and the accuracy of the data (June, 2011). Such resistance works in concert with a commitment to excellence to normalize the quantification of educational processes and the need to assess if excellence is being achieved. Once those two points are conceded, educators should not be surprised that neoliberal understandings of education provide the foundation for accountability systems, as those understandings undergird quantification and assessment. Since accountability follows assessment, and since assessment is a necessary aspect of commitments to excellence, such commitments rationalize and legitimize accountability regimes.

While everything in postsecondary education is committed to being excellent, because excellence is a relational measure, some things will be more or less excellent than others. As such, a commitment to excellence assumes and normalizes the idea that all institutional actors are in competing with each other. Such an assumption is an essential part of neoliberal ideology, as competition is the organizing frame of economic institution and individual relations (Brown, 2015; Mirowski, 2013). The same holds true for the neoliberal university (Marginson, 2004). Competition manifests internally, in that faculty compete for securing the external funding or highest teaching evaluations (Bok, 2003) and students compete for admissions or academic awards (Davies & Hammock, 2005), and externally, when

institutions compete against each other in rankings and league tables (Hazelkorn, 2011) and nations compete against each other for postsecondary educational prestige (Marginson, 2006). Commitments to excellence naturalize these competitions, which are antithetical to the creative and cooperative processes that undergird emancipatory educational models (hooks, 1994). Further, they normalize and legitimize the asymmetrical outcomes resulting from these biased competitions, outcomes that reinforce particular formations of social power.

While neoliberal ideology treats competition as natural and objective process, as Mirowski (2013) and Brown (2015) discuss, it is artificially created and performed within an asymmetrical world in which some parties are much more privileged than others. Their analysis is clearly applicable to competition within postsecondary education, as the “winners” of global ranking competitions and external grants come from nations and institutions with the largest amount of financial resources (Marginson, 2006). A commitment to excellence masks such asymmetries and presents a world in which anything can be excellent. This appearance inherently embraces and expresses neoliberal ideology, as it assumes a “free market” in which claims of excellence are made. And just as our economy is based on an artificial, asymmetrical, and notably not-free market (Sweezy, 1942), the dominant understanding of excellence is deliberately created, narrowly defined, and undemocratically determined. Returning to Eagleton (2007), we see that excellence represents “a body meanings and values encoding certain interests” (p. 45) aimed at strengthening and perpetuating neoliberalism.

Resisting Excellence

The paper began with a brief overview of the neoliberalization of postsecondary education in the United States, noting that each manifestation of neoliberal ideology has been the focus of a scholarly literature. Much of that literature is critical of the neoliberal university, which is in stark opposition to the widespread acceptance of commitments to excellence that grew

as the neoliberal university developed. Because excellence appears neutral and natural, it has become a commonsensical goal of postsecondary education and has yet to receive much resistance in the form of scholarship or action. However, the unifying force of excellence undergirds a series of actions and assumptions that rationalize, legitimize, universalize, and naturalize the manifestations of neoliberal ideology scholars have critiqued. As such, critiques of the neoliberalization of postsecondary education must include a fundamental challenge to institutional commitments to excellence

The previous discussion, while only providing a cursory discussion concerning the universalizing of quantifying and making commensurable all educational activities and outcomes, the naturalizing and rationalizing of ubiquitous assessment, the legitimizing of narrowly-defined accountability regimes, and the naturalizing and universalizing of competition within postsecondary education, has shown both the ideological characteristics of commitments to excellence and their neoliberal foundation. In these ways, the acceptance of excellence enables the acceptance of neoliberal ideology within postsecondary education, even as the manifestations of that ideology are continually resisted.

Importantly, excellence does not only legitimize and rationalize the prior extensions of neoliberal ideology in colleges and universities, it enables their further neoliberalization. For example, the quantification, commensurability, and need to assess all educational outcomes has led to calls for standardized exit exams for all students (Marcus, 2014) and the increased focus on impact factors and h-indexes to measure the quality of journals and individual faculty members, respectively (Ramsden, 2009). Yet, these indicators are extremely problematic, and the overall increased focus on quality has not promoted many educational improvements, (Harvey & Newton, 2004). However, because excellence is primarily an ideological tool, the continued failures of the larger quality movement do little to stem the tide of excellence as the unifying force of postsecondary education.

If the argument presented in this paper is sound, to successfully resist the neoliberalization of postsecondary education we must challenge institutional commitments to excellence and expose their neoliberal ideological roots. Such a challenge is admittedly difficult to do, both because of the commonsensical acceptance of excellence as a laudable goal and because the apparent alternative, not caring about quality, is also a problematic position. However, we must engage with this position and question excellence as a legitimate education goal, a goal that currently is unquestionable. The neoliberal world is largely defined by false dichotomies, and a challenge to excellence must be part of a larger resistance to the overly-simplified and over-determined neoliberal world of education in the United States. While the purpose of this paper was not to provide alternative unifying frames for postsecondary education, my hope is that it has demonstrated the need for educators to engage in discussions of potential alternatives, and those alternatives will help strengthen the resistance to the neoliberal university.

¹ Ideology itself has not agency, and instances in which my writing appears to give agency to ideology should be read as shorthand for the complex webs of individuals and institutions that work to perpetuate ideology.

² It is important not to naturalize the idea that every person attends a postsecondary institution, something that is increasingly commonsensical in the United States (Wells, Seifert, & Saunders, 2013), but the increased rates of attendance enable the extension of Althusser's and Apple's discussions of education to include colleges and universities.

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