Humanities in the Age of Austerity: A Case Study from the University of North Dakota

William Caraher, University of North Dakota

Introduction

In January 2018, I took the helm of the *North Dakota Quarterly* (NDQ), a public humanities journal based at the University of North Dakota (UND). In the previous year or so, we had seen our funding eliminated, including the funding for our long-serving managing editor and our subscription manager. This occurred amid a series of budget cuts across the university, a change in university leadership, a new budget model, a new strategic plan, and a newly clarified set of institutional priorities.

The changes at UND were both predictable and shocking. On the one hand, the cuts to the NDQ were not a surprise. We had been operating on borrowed time for a few years and had struggled to adapt our venerable publication to the changing landscape of publishing and higher education. On the other hand, the immediate cause for the cuts was a drop in oil and agricultural prices which led to a reduction of state funds appropriated to UND and increased scrutiny of the budget across campus. This brought unsettling new attention both to academic programs and to the work rhythms of faculty and staff, and it threw the largely peaceful culture of university life into tumult.

As someone who had worked at UND for almost fifteen years, nothing prepared me for how quickly campus culture changed. I was not prepared to compete with my colleagues in other colleges for resources and students. The sudden attention to such minutia as the percentages in faculty contracts, enrollment numbers in upper-level classes, and the square footage of offices seemed misplaced and distrustful. The growing use of digital tools to measure and document faculty productivity and student progress seemed intrusive and, at best, redundant with longstanding practices and, at worst, reductionist or crassly corporate. It felt like certain members of the administration had committed to replacing the longstanding North Dakota practice of doing more with less with an insistence that we do what the administration expected with less. Whatever collective spirit and camaraderie that the former developed, the latter undermined. In just under two years, the university culture seemed to shift from one of creativity and collaboration to one of compliance and coercion.

Like many of my colleagues, I looked both locally and nationally to understand the context for these changes. I read widely in both the latest and classic books on higher education policy, criticism, and history. I taught a class on the budget cuts, openly mocked administrators, co-directed a conference on outrage, served as chair of the Graduate Committee after our graduate program in history had been defunded, and agreed to represent the Graduate School on the Senate Budget Committee. As
someone with a very limited range of responses to crisis and change, I did what I knew and engaged the budget cuts as an intellectual problem. I gave serious effort to understand the shifting culture of academia at UND and nationally, and I looked to turn increasingly sour campus culture into the refreshing lemonade of field study.

**Austerity, State, and the Market**

A casual reading of recent literature in public higher education introduces the word austerity to describe cuts to public programs (Blyth; Fabricant and Brier). The term has acquired ideological and intellectual baggage, but the kind of austerity that this article will focus on is the main expression of a larger neoliberal package of ideas that privileges the market as the dominant force in producing wealth and value in society. Neoliberal ideas initially developed at a macro-economic scale in the immediate post-war period, both as a challenge to Keynesian economic models and as a critique of mid-century political views of the statist projects and economies of the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Fascism in Europe. As David Harvey explains, neoliberalism became a cornerstone of Thatcher’s and Reagan’s reimagining, both of the national and then the global economy. In this context, neoliberal thinkers and politicians argued that state institutions impeded a person’s economic (and even social) freedom, and this ultimately undermined innovation and entrepreneurship which should serve as the engines for economic growth. Neoliberals argued that the state’s control over resources and bureaucratized regulation stifled individual creativity and competition as well as insulated certain sectors of the economy into complacency.

These political attitudes also supported an economic view that saw the flow of state funds into the economy as producing inflationary conditions which dampened markets, weakened the private sector, and impaired economic growth. Austerity, then, represented a strategy to reduce the economic influence of the state over the economy, to forestall inflation, and to allow for markets and the private sector to produce growth. Whatever the economic merits of this approach (and recent work has cast significant doubts on whether austerity does stimulate growth), in the American context, these policies have weakened the social safety net created during the Great Depression, turned significant quantities of public assets over to the private sector, and shaped global political and economic policy.

My interest is on how these measures have impacted higher education and, in particular, played a part in the defunding of the *NDQ*. Three elements of neoliberal policies have ultimately come to shape a certain moral view of the world: (1) the belief that markets and competition provide the best context for the expression of individual freedom, (2) that success in the market reflects the value of the individual (and the institution), and (3) that market competition produces efficiencies by undermining the complacency of entrenched publicly funded interests (which also erode the
opportunities for freedom).

The impact of these three attitudes on higher education in the US has been dramatic. This is partly because neoliberal faith in market competition has certain parallels with the long-standing belief in the free interplay of ideas and meritocratic competition within academia. In recent times, however, faith in the academic meritocracy has become elided with neoliberal rhetoric on the moral good of market competition and the market as an expression of individual freedom. This combination has produced an almost hegemonic commitment to the market practices. In other words, individuals within and outside of the academy, both in the administration, in the legislators, among alumni, and in the classroom, have seen market forces as beneficial agents of change and as justification for wholesale revisions in curricula and educational policies. These attitudes reflect certain hegemonic aspects of neoliberal thinking that makes it very hard for us to imagine alternative ways of doing things (Harvey).

These forces played out in the recent history of the NDQ in a number of intriguing and informative ways. The Quarterly lost funding amid a series of rather dramatic budget cuts at the state level. Many in the legislature privileged a desire to keep the state friendly to business by cutting taxes and regulation (and, ideally, allowing market forces to generate growth rather than direct state investment in programs). They coupled this with a tendency to see public higher education as an expensive luxury that had been too long protected from market forces and therefore inefficient (by definition). Raising taxes to support state programs, then, would have made the state less friendly to business and limited the freedom of individuals to use their funds to pursue whatever education they desired.

At UND, the proximate causes for cuts to the NDQ stemmed from the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences urging us to produce a “sustainable business model” for the journal. Apparently, the existing model for the NDQ which combined funds from the College of Arts and Sciences with income from subscriptions was no longer sustainable, despite being in place for over sixty years. Its lack of sustainability, at least in the rhetoric of our administrators, reflected an expectation that projects like the NDQ should be able to subsist largely on private funds. In other words, this new definition of sustainability was something that existed only in the private sector, rather than as a shared commitment supported by public and private resources. This, of course, parallels the larger trends and attitudes toward public higher education more broadly, which has long relied upon both public and private sources of funding.

At the same time, these arguments also coincide with a rhetorical position that sees the arts and humanities at state universities, in particular, as luxuries (see Kleinman). The critique of this position is well-known, so I'll address it here only briefly. Politicians inclined to attack the arts and
humanities have tended to argue that they are not only useless degrees that produce students who are a burden on society, but also that the character of a humanities education is the deeply suspect hotbed of post-modernism, anti-nationalism, liberalism, and other nefarious positions that undermine the shared values of the community and social cohesion. The merging of moral judgements on the humanities in higher education and the purported lack of viability of graduates with humanities degrees in the marketplace is consistent with the larger ideological project of contemporary neoliberalism. The market is not only the source of resources, but also operationalizes the opinio communis, reflects the values of a society, and optimizes the flow of resources to areas best suited for the future of society.

This tendency to diminish the prospects of the humanities and humanities graduates among political and campus leaders invested in austerity appears to be largely a rhetorical one in which the usual line of causality is reversed. The moral economy of neoliberalism has tended to see failure in the market as a moral failing. In the case of the humanities, however, the critique of the market and neoliberalism by scholars of the humanities represents a moral failing of these individuals (even though the lines between neoliberalism and certain kinds of post-modern critiques, for example, are well-known among scholars (Harvey). Following this logic, scholars and students of the humanities appear less likely to be successful in the private sector, despite a substantial body of evidence to the contrary (see, for example, Humphreys and Kelly). These attitudes appear to be shared by students as well as is visible in the declining number of majors in the humanities.¹

Reducing funds to the humanities and redirecting them toward practical and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields is seen as a way to make the university more responsive to the marketplace on the basis of a kind of moral reasoning rather than practical data. That the humanities have seen declining numbers—in part as a result of this inversion of neoliberal logic—has become the evidence that students are “voting with their feet” rather than the result of critical attention in the media or among legislators or funding cuts to promoting the humanities on campus. In this context, defunding a project like the NDQ becomes an opportunity to demonstrate a commitment to practical education and short-term workforce development as well as a rejection of morally suspect fields of in the arts and humanities. The argument that the NDQ did not develop a sustainable business model (i.e., a model that relies more on the market for sustainability) is both true and confirms the larger perspective that the humanities are not viable fields in the contemporary economy and do not deserve continued public support.

This is, of course, largely theater, but a particularly pernicious kind of theater that reflects the internalization of certain aspects of neoliberalism among faculty and administrators (in a way that

¹ https://humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatordoc.aspx?i=34
suggests Antonio Gramsci’s idea of hegemony). Moreover, it confounds the efficient operation of a university (which confirms the argument that the public sector is intrinsically less efficient than the private sector) and replaces the aspirations for a genuinely meritocratic kind of competition—a marketplace of ideas (Menand)—with a crasser, less productive, but far more public, race to the bottom.

Performing Austerity

Advocates for austerity see the state as morally corrupting, as limiting individual freedom, and as stifling to economic growth, which is best achieved by allowing market forces to play out in an unconstrained way. These attitudes have particularly negative implications for state universities, because as state institutions they are intrinsically inefficient and undermining the competitive function of markets. Cutting higher education budgets, then, pushes these institutions to exist in a market-driven world which should improve efficiency by fostering competition for resources and ensuring that capital does not get bottled up in supporting institutions that reflect values that run counter to the market ethos. Most of these changes at UND, however, (and I would suggest nationally) amount to a kind of theater designed to align the appearance of competition and market-driven policies with a series of outcomes deemed desirable by local stakeholders.

To be clear, higher education has always cultivated this kind of theater as a way to normalize the ascendency of certain groups and to produce outcomes that appear to be a kind of natural result of broader social competition. Historically, higher education has used competition as a way to demonstrate the supposed superiority of white, upper- and middle-class, males and promoted traditional liberal arts and humanities degrees as exceptional in content and rigor. David Labaree has summarized a particularly obvious expression of this kind of competitive theater in the long-term persistence of the academic hierarchy among colleges and universities in the US (Labaree). A relatively small number of schools and their products tend to dominate the intellectual landscape of American higher education. Not only do top tier schools hire faculty from other top tier schools, but lower tier schools also tend to hire a disproportionate number of faculty with degrees from traditionally elite institutions. Lower tier schools see this as a way of imitating the practices of more elite institutions and moving up. In reality, it tends to reinforce the difference between the top tier schools and their lower tier numbers as faculty from elite schools tend to privilege their colleagues at elite schools over students that they produce at lower tier institutions. This bias toward the traditional centers of higher education in the US reproduces itself in competition for grants, fellowships, and even in peer review despite historical efforts to present these competitions as meritocratic. The long tradition of a kind of theater of competition in higher education produced a culture that is particular susceptible to types of dissimulation at the core of neoliberal thinking.
It seems to me, however, that the conventional theater of competition in academia (while no less problematic) is similar on the surface to what David Harvey recognizes as the internalization of certain aspects of neoliberalism. The idea that competition and the market dictate the value of intellectual or academic work extends across contemporary society to include faculty and administrators in a way that suggests Antonio Gramsci’s idea of hegemony. The most visible expression of this is “zero sum” thinking that organizes campus priorities into winners and losers. Winners get funding (because they’ve won) and losers lose funding with the result that the winning ways of the winners will, over time, come to dominate the losing ways of the losers.

As a result, there already were winners and losers in higher education produced by generations of historical forces which are not necessarily unproblematic or somehow ideally suited (by dint of their co-evolution with market, social, and cultural forces) for efficient education, new knowledge production, or social good. Neoliberal priorities, at least to those viewing higher education from the perspective of an external stakeholder, nevertheless required a kind of change that reflects the conspicuous pivoting of higher education toward assumed market needs, toward the methods of the market, and, at very least, away from disciplines overtly critical of the market. In other words, whatever the processes that created the current landscape of higher education, neoliberal policies push us to align more clearly with methods and outcomes that reflect contemporary political and economic priorities and, perhaps more importantly, expectations.

The language of these priorities and expectations are well-known. Many in the public sphere view the humanities and arts as inefficient, antiquated, or a luxury, despite the emergence of a somewhat disappointing (and perhaps ineffectual) counter-discourse that argues for the economic importance of the degrees in these fields. More importantly, university and state leaders have regularly put forward STEM fields, with their sometimes overtly vocational goals, as a more efficient way to address the economic needs of local communities and, as a result, a better use for limited public funds. Moreover, public support for these fields both drives and ultimately parallels student interest in these economically productive disciplines (and students and tuition dollars will follow). The emphasis on STEM also attracts visible support from the private sector and federal grants.

A secondary challenge, and one that is of more interest to me, is whether it is possible to make the rise of STEM in higher education appear to be the historical result of market competition within the institution. It seems to me that this has some value because it allows administrators to tout and stakeholders to recognize the synchronization between market efficiencies within and outside of these institutions. The rise of STEM fields, in this instance, allows higher education administrators to point to the efficiency of their institutions, because ultimately the same results suggest the same internal mechanisms.
Elsewhere I’ve called this move replacing the university as a knowledge factory—based on the historical affinities between university curricula and the assembly line (well described by Louis Menand—to the university as a billboard. The university as a billboard represents the growing desire to demonstrate to the public that universities are responsive to market forces and have internalized the values of the marketplace. The university as a billboard also reassures an anxious public (or at least a certain sector of stakeholders) both that the university is an efficient institution deserving of the continued investment of resources and that public resources will attract outside investment through tuition, grants, and private donor contributions.

Returning to the fate of the NDQ and considering it in this context, I’d contend that there is little room for a public humanities quarterly because it does little to reinforce public view of higher education, which expects it to align with the public’s own understanding of market forces shaping public (and private) institutions. If the university is a billboard, then, something like the NDQ is a distraction. The priority both internally and externally is to stay on message and on strategy, and if we take the logic of the market to its natural conclusion, the risk of straying from the message is existential.

More Billboard than Factory

As part of the effort to produce a compelling billboard for various stakeholders, universities have started to privatize core functions in order to demonstrate a willingness to optimize their operations and to promote their operational model as one that rewards competitive, efficient, and socially responsible activities (at least within a neoliberal model of society that views with a jaundiced eye all state-sponsored activities). On a superficial level, this is not entirely objectionable. After all, creating a metaphorical or real billboard for the activities at a university celebrates the impact and significance of faculty, students, and staff, builds a sense of community and pride, and attracts resources to the university from a range of sources including alumni, prospective students, and legislators. Intercollegiate athletics is perhaps the best example of this kind of billboard, where the presentation of the product on the field or court obfuscates the complex processes that allow this product to exist.

At the same time, the view of the university as a billboard can spill over into the internal workings of the university as a factory. Because state universities receive funding from a range of sources including state legislatures, alumni, students, and granting agencies, there is a wide interest in the process that creates the well-educated student or faculty research. In fact, the process is often easier to evaluate than the product of a university education. The latter tends to be subject to myriad variables and continues to accrue value over a lifetime. As a result, the billboard tends to promote processes that reflect the latest in market-hardened efficiency in place of the difficult to understand
product of higher education.

In this context, the elusive rhetoric of a sustainable business model is less about ensuring that the *NDQ* survives into the future and more about consigning a public humanities journal like the *NDQ* to the ranks of inefficient and complacent university functions. Successful competition within the crucible of the market represented the only way in which a journal like the *NDQ* could be a successful contribution to the university billboard. In fact, a sustainable business model that included state funding was impossible within the set of expectations that motivated austerity. In contrast, the value of the journal as a critical product was simply irrelevant to its sustainability.

Unfortunately, the simplified message of the billboard too often spills over into the inner workings of the university. As faculty, administrators, and staff internalize the spirit of competition across campus in an effort to demonstrate that the university is subject to the same kinds of market forces as the private sector, the institution is as likely to produce inefficiencies as to streamline processes. Competition for students tends to lead to duplication of marketing and outreach efforts. Funding models that seek to recognize research or teaching excellence or even rein in wasteful competition between programs or departments become systems to be gamed. The long-standing and historical divisions on campus—colleges or departments that serve to protect academic and intellectual freedom and distinct disciplinary traditions—become barriers to cooperation and collaboration rather than efficient incubators of distinctive methods, practices, and approaches to problems. As a number of recent commentators have noticed (Hall), by projecting the billboard internally and promoting the appearance of competition, we distill the dynamism and diversity of higher education (or as David Labaree calls it, the “perfect mess”) down to two closely related metrics: dollars and enrollments (which are really just another measure of dollars). As Gary Hall has recently considered in his work on the “uberficiation” of the university, the growing ability to precisely trace the flow of capital—its student tuition or faculty labor—has created a system that is pennywise and pound foolish in the largely historical organization of the university (Hall). In fact, our quest to use dollars, enrollments, and other easily measured indicators as markers of efficiency at the individual and department level has superseded the messier project of attempting to understand the product of the higher education factory, whether that be new ideas or high-quality students and graduates.

At its worst, the billboard approach to higher education promotes efficiency and competition at the expense of learning and discovery. And, as much as competition evokes longstanding fantasies of the academic meritocracy and satisfies the hegemonic attitudes that equate all waste with indolence and sloth, it rarely corresponds neatly with the actual work of students and faculty at a university. For many stakeholders, however, there is a strong temptation to see the product of the university as a factory as only as important as the revenue it can generate. Learning, discovery, education, and knowledge making are difficult to measure. Enrollments and revenue, in contrast, are obvious
metrics for accomplishment, but poor surrogates for the ultimate goals of the university.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal of the university as a billboard is complex and, I’d contend, not fully understood even by its advocates. If we assume that the spread of neoliberal attitudes has more to do with a kind of deep-seated, Gramscian hegemony than a series of compelling arguments, then it is hardly surprising to find that assumptions of (in)efficiency drive policy more than any well-defined interest in outcomes. At the same time, the decline in resources of the humanities both on UND’s campus and nationally as well as the defunding of long-standing projects like the NDQ represents more than just public relations gambits designed to make higher education look lean and market-savvy.

The humanities have always served an important role in developing the leadership class in the US and as a result, elites have always sought ways to limit and influence access to education in the humanities and liberal arts. Historically this has manifested itself in competition between universities and colleges, as historically elite schools have tended to celebrate a broadly liberal arts curriculum as a hallmark of their elite status. At the same time, schools looking to ascend the rankings have had to balance the desire to imitate the schools at the top of the higher education pyramid with the need to cultivate stakeholders through billboard-style claims to their efficiency and immediate economic benefit to their communities and students (Labaree). From its earliest days, UND has demonstrated a push-pull of support for the humanities as both a key aspect of democratic higher education and a wasteful extravagance best left to more well-heeled universities designed to produce the next generation of elite leaders (Geiger). Despite the historical parallels, I’d still contend that the current version of this debate grounded in neoliberal attitudes toward the function of the state and the goal of education has transformed the conversation. If throughout most of the twentieth century, a liberal arts education with a strong emphasis on the humanities was a hallmark of the leadership class, in the twenty-first century, the political elite have come to question this very formula. Talk of preparing leaders while endorsing approaches to higher education that shift resources from the humanities to other fields suggests a significant change in priorities.

More importantly, this shift in the basic expectations for the functioning of higher education presupposes an outcome. As the de-emphasis on the humanities has served to limit access to the leadership class by shifting resources elsewhere under the guise of efficiency and competition, it has also served to reify the existing social order as the product of similar forces. By privileging competition in the present, the current leadership presents disciplinary priorities and even the larger social order as the outcome of similar competition and similar ground rules. Part of the hegemonic character of neoliberalism is that it presents itself as a historical reality rather than a set of
constructed expectations in the present. In this context, the defunding of the NDQ not only demonstrates a renewed commitment to efficient education, but also the historic failure of the traditional humanities project at UND.

Whatever the long-term goals for higher education, the billboard constructed by current leadership is not only an argument for how much more efficient a university can become, but also for their own position of authority. Diminishing the role of the humanities becomes not just a result of present policies and practice, but also the natural result of past competition which has forged the current leadership as well as their ideas. While this might represent my descent into a position of pure cynicism, the consistency of the rhetoric both on campus and in the larger public sphere hints otherwise. The ultimate goal of neoliberalism is not to make the public sphere more efficient, but to fortify the position of private capital in society.

Epilogue

There is hope.

By continuing to edit and publish the North Dakota Quarterly, we offer a space of discontinuity to the prevailing direction of the modern university in two ways. First, the NDQ presents a counter-billboard to efforts to paint the university as the rational outcome of market-driven competition by coopting and using the very logic of neoliberalism to complicate its own outcomes. If resources at the university tend to flow toward programs, degrees, and projects that have practical economic value, then a successful, sustainable public humanities journal shows that the work of the humanities can generate economic value. In other words, the persistence of the NDQ gives the lie to the idea that it is not efficient or reasonable for the university to help promote and sustain the humanities in the current economic climate. More than that, by loudly persisting, it refuses to be an example of how a commitment to efficiency at the modern university should exclude the humanities. The best counter-argument to defunding the public humanities because they are not competitive is by simply refusing to lose. The fact that you’re reading this volume of the NDQ allows us to point out that a journal like this can survive in the competitive space of the modern market even under changing conditions of sustainability, whereas other priorities, whether in technology, professional programs, or other highly funded initiatives, require a constant stream of public investment for the same outcome. The persistence of the NDQ alone demonstrates that the public humanities can find partners and models that will provide sustainable funding for these projects when other fields of much greater interest to the private sector continue to rely on public funds. The place of the university in providing public subsidies to bolster the technology and workforce needs of the private sector complicates a simple view of the neoliberal economy functioning outside of the inefficient
and interfering influence of the state.

Setting up the NDQ as a counter-billboard offers a sense of ironic satisfaction, but such gestures of resistance are hollow if resistance alone is the goal. After all, the need for thoughtful, public interventions in the humanities goes well beyond complicating a neoliberal worldview. The NDQ’s continued significance depends upon its ongoing, substantive contributions to the world through the thoughtful creativity and criticism of our authors and editors. In recent years, the NDQ has explored the character of transnationalism, the potential of the slow moment as an antidote to modern acceleration, and the spirit of defiance in the works of Thomas McGrath, alongside a regular stream of poetry, fiction, and art to enliven a world increasingly defined by fake news and clickbait. My editorial board has reinforced in me over the last year that the sustaining motivation for a journal like the NDQ is to make the world better by amplifying the voices of new writers and old hands, of indigenous communities, of overlooked groups, of students and their teachers, of big thinkers and tinkerers, and most importantly, of our readers.

Thank you for reading and sustaining the Quarterly.

Works Cited


