Neoliberalism in the Spellings Report: A Language-in-Use Discourse Analysis

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Neoliberalism, the political-economic ideology promoting the ideals of privatization and marketization in both the private and public spheres, has become the dominant economic and social principle of the late 20th century (Giroux, 2002; Hursh, 2007). The increasing domination of this ideology can be seen in several areas of American life. In the political arena, parties on both the right and the left have adopted many neoliberal principles as part of their respective platforms (McChesney, 1999). Economically, the principles of Reaganomics (the notion that economic policies intended to lower prices, make products more affordable, and create economic growth should appeal to businesses rather than consumers), which continue to guide many of nation's economic policies, are rooted in neoliberal thought. Socially, stories of parents selling the naming rights of their children to corporations or small towns using eBay to solicit bids to rename their municipality are evidence of a culture becoming increasingly defined by the principles and values of neoliberalism (Giroux, 2002).

This rising domination of neoliberal ideology is also evident in the discourse on U.S. higher education (Ayers, 2005; Baez, 2007; Giroux, 2002; Slaughter & Leslie, 1996). One of the most recent examples of this trend is the 2006 report of the commission appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. The intent of this report (commonly referred to as the Spellings Report) was to present the results of the commission's year-long examination of higher education, as well as to provide recommendations to ensure that U.S. colleges and universities meet their "unfulfilled promise" (Spellings, 2006, p. xi). In doing this, however, the report also serves as an example of the continued branding of American higher education within a neoliberal worldview.

The purpose of this study is to use language-in-use discourse analysis to illustrate the abundance of neoliberal ideology in the Spellings Report. Specifically, this paper examines the way language in the Spellings Report recasts U.S. higher education as primarily a venue for commercial investment where success is judged almost exclusively by the development of human capital. This approach contrasts with the view of higher education as an avenue through which new knowledge is generated and students gain the experiences and insight needed to become productive citizens in a democratic society, unfettered by the need for commercial application or external

justification. This recasting reflects a positioning of higher education within contemporary neoliberal ideology and the affirmation of the notion of higher education as a private good, which runs contrary to the ideals of early philosophers of education such as Thomas Jefferson and John Dewey who extolled the importance of higher education in creating an educated and socially-conscious citizenry. Before engaging in this analysis, I will provide a brief introduction to neoliberal ideology and an overview of language-in-use discourse analysis. These sections will be followed by a discursive analysis of the Spellings Report and an examination of the impact of neoliberal ideology in higher education.

A Brief History of Neoliberalism

The seeds of neoliberalism date back to the works of Adam Smith, John Locke, and David Hume. Smith in particular is often credited with introducing the ideals of market fundamentalism through his 1776 book, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations.* In this book, Smith offered one of the first comprehensive defenses of free market economic policies. He proposed that the prices of goods would self-regulate and automatically settle at equilibrium through the voluntary bargaining of sellers and buyers. As a result, each individual's pursuit of his or her own private interest would ultimately lead to economic growth managed not by governmental regulation, but the "invisible hand" of the market (Smith, 1776/1904). For these classical liberals, the role of government with regard to the economy should be limited to protecting the market against intervening forces such as monopolies and foreign invasion.

Classical liberals also recognized the importance of government in providing certain goods, such as education and utilities, which are essential to the public good but inadequately provided by the market (Gaus, 1983). This distinction between the economic and the social domains is an important ideological dichotomy of classical liberalism (Baez, 2007). For classical liberals, the economic domain was to be governed by free market economic rationale with very little governmental interference. The social domain, however, required public (i.e., state) provisions for goods that were beneficial to the whole community (such as education, streetlights, roads, etc.). In other words, the free market economic rationale governing the economic domain was not to be employed in the governing of the social domain (Lemke, 2001).

During the latter part of the 19th century, critics of classical liberalism such as J. A. Hobson and John Maynard Keynes attempted to account for what they believed to be the many failures of the free market economy. They initiated a movement toward a more "progressive" economic philosophy, advocating government intervention in the marketplace as a means of ensuring economic growth and safeguarding citizens against the risk of the "free market" (Hurst, 2007). This Keynesian economic policy, which would become the foundation of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, gained considerable support throughout the early and mid-20th century (Gaus, 1983; Hurst, 2007).

By the mid- to late-20th century, however, the ideals of classical liberalism gained renewed appeal. Gary Becker at the University of Chicago and Nobel laureate economists Friedrich A. van Hayek and Milton Friedman are often credited with leading the resurrection of liberalism in the United States (Baez, 2007; Lemke, 2001). This form of liberalism (often referred to as neoliberalism) differed in one significant way from the classical liberalism of Smith and his colleagues. While classical liberal economic theory advanced the idea that certain functions such as education, transportation, and healthcare should be provided by the state free of economic rationale, neoliberalism attempts to reposition the social domain as part of the economic domain:

> The key element in the Chicago School's approach is their consistent expansion of the economic form to apply to the social sphere, thus eliding any difference between the economy and the social. In the process, they transpose economic analytical schemata and criteria for economic decision making onto spheres which are not, or certainly not exclusively, economic areas, or indeed stand out for differing from any economic rationality. (Lemke, 2001, p. 197)

This neoliberal tendency to blend the economic and social domains fundamentally changes the operation of traditional state services and individual behavior. Under the principles of neoliberalism, state services are to be motivated by the economic principles of efficiency, profitability, and productivity. Neoliberals also propose that the entrepreneurial and competitive behavior of individuals originally confined to the economic domain be adopted by individuals in the social domain. In other words, neoliberals believe that all human action and social institutions should be recast and judged based almost exclusively on economic rationality (Ayers, 2005; Baez, 2007; Giroux, 2002; Hurst, 2007).

The recasting of state services and individual behavior within the neoliberal framework has important implications for higher education. The traditional view of classical liberals and other economists was that education was a public good essential to the rise of a vibrant democracy. Education, because it fell under the domain of the state, was not to be motivated by cost or profits and therefore could not be expected to operate "efficiently" in the way typically defined in the business community (Baez, 2007). Within the tenets of neoliberalism, however, education operates under the same economic principles as private industry. Therefore, any assessment of education (K-12 or postsecondary) must examine elements such as economic profitability and efficiency.

The intensification of neoliberal discourse also affects the purpose of education. Within neoliberalism, education serves primarily one purpose: human capital development (Engel, 2000). As the emphasis on human capital development increases, education becomes less an opportunity for students to develop the social and interpersonal skills needed to participate in a democratic society and more an investment in a private good based entirely on the fulfillment of individual needs:

> To the extent that education is geared towards [human capital development], the purpose of education migrates from democratic ends to economics ends; that is the discourse of education for participation and leadership in democratic society is overtaken by the economic discourse of production and consumerism. (Ayers, 2005, p. 531)

Neoliberalism plays an ever-increasing role in K-12 and higher education in the United States, despite criticisms that have labeled it "the most dangerous ideology of the current historical moment" (Giroux, 2002, p. 428; see also McChesney, 1999). The passage in 2001 of the No Child Left Behind Act, with its emphasis on educational efficiency and standardized testing as a means of providing to consumers an indicator of educational success, relies heavily on the principles of neoliberalism (Hurst, 2007). In addition, in an examination of community college mission statements, Ayers (2005) found that much of the justification behind public investment in higher education is based on the idea that the increased human capital developed by educated citizens will result in greater profits for public enterprise and greater economic growth. Moreover, as this study will show, much of the recent discourse from the U.S. Department of Education around improving higher education uses language consistent with neoliberalism's market-driven ideology.

Language-in-Use Discourse Analysis

To examine the positioning of higher education within the neoliberal ideal, I use language-in-use discourse analysis. Language-in-use discourse analysis is one of several methods for conducting discursive analysis of human communication (Gee, 2005). The central idea of this type of analysis is the belief that humans continually and actively use written and spoken language to build and rebuild the world around them. Therefore, any piece of communication can be viewed as a tool used to design or build certain "things" (Gee, 2005). The things built by language have been described by Gee as the "building tasks" of language and include activities, identities, relationships, significance, politics, connections, and sign systems or knowledge.

Each of the seven building tasks gives rise to different questions about a piece of language. Within this article, I argue that the Spellings Report systematically uses three building tasks to define higher education through the lens of neoliberalism: identities, connections, and significance. In building identities, language-in-use analysis proposes, language is used to ascribe certain roles to individuals or situations. The analytic question that arises from this assertion asks what identity (or identities) is a particular piece of discourse being used to enact. A different way of addressing this question is to ask what identity (or identities) a piece of discourse is trying to get others to recognize. In building connections, language-in-use analysis suggests that language is used to render certain things connected or relevant to each other. The question that emerges from this assertion asks how a piece of language connects or disconnects things. In other words, how does a piece of discourse make one topic relevant or irrelevant to another? Finally, the building of significance suggests that language is used to give certain things meaning or value in certain ways. This assertion leads researchers to ask how a piece of language is used to make certain things significant or insignificant and in what way (Gee, 2005).

To "analyze the workings of these building tasks in specific instances" of human communication, Gee (2005) proposes the use of several "tools of inquiry" (p. 20). Two of these tools are of particular interest for this analysis of the Spellings Report: social languages and intertextuality. The social languages tool suggests that people use different language styles in different settings. For example, a college football player during practice will often use a certain vernacular that is clearly associated with the social language of football. This same athlete, however, will likely use a completely different, more

academic vernacular when talking with a professor. Investigating how different social languages are used and mixed within a piece of discourse is one tool for engaging in language-in-use discourse analysis. Intertextuality, which is closely related to social languages, refers to the cross-referencing of other text or certain types of text common in human communication. When we speak or write, our communication uses words that relate directly to another piece of communication. Therefore, when studying a piece of discourse, a researcher can examine how the use of words from other contexts is incorporated into a given text in a way that allows that text to build each of the aforementioned building tasks.

Neoliberal Discourse within the Spellings Report

Upon obtaining a copy of the 76-page Spellings Report from the U.S. Department of Education's Web site, I subjected the report to a discursive analysis based on the principles of language-in-use discourse analysis. As mentioned earlier, through this analysis I found that the Spellings Report uses three building tasks to place higher education within neoliberal ideology: identity, connections, and significance. Below I identify specific examples from the Spellings Report that illustrate how it constructs each of these building tasks.

Identities

From the Spellings Report emerge three identities that emphasize neoliberal ideology and attempt to conceptualize higher education within this ideology. The first identity describes students as workers, to the near exclusion of their identity as non-economic entities. The first evidence of this conceptualization is in the Preamble of the report (Spellings, 2006):

> In tomorrow's world a nation's wealth will derive from its capacity to educate, attract, and retain citizens who are to able to work smarter and learn faster—making educational achievement ever more important both for individuals and for society writ large. (p. xii)

In the first clause of this quote, the writers of the Spellings Report proclaim their belief in the importance of educated citizens (i.e., students). In the second clause, it becomes clear why educated citizens are important in the eyes of the report: for their ability to work smarter and faster. This discourse emphasizes the position that valuable citizens

are those who can contribute to the economy through their ability to work. In no part of this quote (or in any text around this quote) are non-economic qualities such as moral or ethical responsibility mentioned as important parts of the identity of students.

The building of this identity is also evident in the section of the report, Findings Regarding Access. In reference to the United States' need to increase the number of minority students participating in and completing higher education, the report (Spellings, 2006) states: "The nation will rely on these groups as a major source of new workers as demographic shifts in the US population continue" (p. 8). The language used here implies that the nation will primarily rely on newly educated minorities in their role as workers and contributors to the economy. Again, this statement virtually ignores the many other ways in which educated minorities can contribute to society. This quote implies that the identity of minority students as workers is more useful to the nation than their other identities, such as social leaders, voters, or family members.

Related to the building of this connection between workers and learners, a second identity in the Spellings Report creates a relation between knowledge (i.e., learning) and work skills. Throughout the report, language is used in a way that identifies knowledge as being valuable only in its ability to increase the work skills of students for use in the marketplace. In reference to the "disturbing signs" found by the commission with regards to higher education, the report (Spellings, 2006) states: "Unacceptable numbers of college graduates enter the workforce without the skills employers say they need in an economy in which, as the truism holds correctly, knowledge matters more than ever" (p. x). Later in the report, a very similar statement is made with regard to learning:

> These shortcomings [with regard to the learning of college graduates] have real-world consequences. Employers report repeatedly that many new graduates they hire are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today's workplaces. (p. 3)

In each of these excerpts, the authors of the Spellings Report acknowledge their belief that student learning in college is inadequate because it fails to meet the standards set by employers. By creating this association, the report constructs an identity for the skills and knowledge that should be learned during college as those deemed necessary by business and industry. In constructing this identity, non-

commodified knowledge, skills, and wisdom, which have traditionally been at the core of higher education, are relegated to the distant periphery by the Spellings Report (Ayers, 2005).

The third identity created by the authors of the Spelling Report involves assigning to higher education the identity of private industry. Colleges and universities are depicted as industries to be governed according to the principles and operating norms of the business sector. It is here where the aforementioned tools of inquiry, social languages, and intertexuality, are most useful. Throughout the Spellings Report, words and phrases typically associated with the social language of the business community are used to describe various aspects of higher education. For example, the report (Spellings, 2006) uses the word "consumer" 19 times in a variety of ways (emphasis added):

> In this *consumer*-driven environment, students increasingly care little about the distinctions that sometimes preoccupy the academic establishment. (p. xi)

> These third-party payments tend to insulate what economists would call producers—colleges and universities—from the consequences of their own spending decisions, while *consumers*—students—also lack incentives to make decisions based on their own limited resources. (p. 11)

> The strategy for the collection and use of data should be designed to recognize the complexity of higher education, have the capacity to accommodate diverse *consumer* preferences. (p. 21)

Within the business world, the word "consumer" is commonly used to refer to anyone who purchases a commodity or service. By using the word so frequently in relation to higher education, the writers of the Spellings Report are creating an environment where the language norms used in the business community are adopted to discourse about higher education. This intertextuality conflates higher education and business in a way that repositions college and universities (both public and private) as for-profit enterprises.

The use of the word "consumer" is not the only instance of intertextuality found in this report. Several other words associated with the social language of business are used throughout. Words that are common in the social language of business are used throughout the report. For example, variations of "competition" and "efficiency" are used more than 15 times each, while the word "accountability" appears

over 20 times. Each of these examples provides further support for the idea that the Spellings Report uses language to create an identity for higher education as a private, for-profit industry.

In building each of the three identities detailed in this section, higher education is clearly being conceptualized to fit within the tenets of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism portrays citizenship as an entirely privatized affair with the aim being to produce competitive, self-interested citizens vying for their own material gain (Giroux, 2002). By emphasizing the identity of students as potential workers who obtain knowledge that will be valuable in the workplace, the writers of the Spellings Report appear to have adopted this very narrow idea of citizenship. By creating an identity for higher education as a private industry, the Spellings Report also implicitly supports the neoliberal belief that all industries should be managed and rationalized using the logic of the free market, regardless of its location in the public or private sphere.

Connections

Gee (2005) hypothesizes that language is used to create connections or disconnections between certain things. Within the Spellings Report, this building task is used in the creation of a strong connection between the rising cost of higher education and lack of institutional efficiency. It is widely known that college tuitions have been rising and are expected to keep rising for the foreseeable future. Most higher education experts attribute this trend to rising costs of providing higher education and decreasing state and federal subsidies to colleges and universities.

It is apparent which of these reasons the report's authors believe deserves the most blame. In the summary of findings on the cost and affordability of higher education, the authors of the Spellings Report (2006) acknowledge the fact that state subsidies have decreased: "Even as institutional costs go up, in recent years state subsidies have decreased on a per capita basis and public concern about affordability may eventually contribute to an erosion of confidence in higher education" (p. 2). While this sentence acknowledges decreases in state funding, it does not indicate that the authors believe that such decreases are an important reason for the increasing costs of higher education. In the next sentence, however, the authors clearly connect rising costs with institutional inefficiency: "In our view, affordability is directly affected by a financing system that provides limited incentives for colleges and universities to take aggressive steps to

improve institutional efficiency and productivity" (p. 2).

This theme is carried into the next paragraph of that section. In the first sentence, the authors propose that, to improve affordability, "a focused program of cost-cutting and productivity improvements in U.S. postsecondary institutions" should be established (Spellings 2006, p. 2).With regard to state funding, the authors of the report assert:

> State and federal policymakers must do their part as well, by supporting the spread of technology that can lower costs, encouraging more high school-based provision of college courses, and working to relieve the regulatory burden on colleges and universities. (Spellings, 2006, p. 2)

These sections make clear that for colleges to become more affordable, they must be run more efficiently and be more productive. The role of state and federal policymakers in lowering costs, then, is not necessarily through continuing to fulfill their historic obligation to support colleges and universities financially, but by creating policies that allow colleges to become more efficient and productive.

The authors of the Spellings Report (2006) expand upon this relationship as the report continues. Two very different sentences describe why college tuition has increased so rapidly in recent years.

> Tuition increases for students have gone hand in hand with a rapid rise in the cost of operating institutions. (p. 10)

> One of the reasons tuition and fees have increased is that state funding fell to the lowest level in over two decades. (p. 10)

The former statement employs a common English idiom (hand in hand) to build the connection between tuition increases and increasing institutional costs. This idiom implies a strong, very close connection between two things. In addition, because this idiom is commonly used to create a relationship between only two variables, one could infer from the statement that the authors attribute the majority of the blame for rising tuition on rising institutional costs which result primarily from institutional inefficiency. The vocabulary used in the latter statement creates a similar, but somewhat different, impression. In this sentence, the clause "one of the reasons" is used to make the connection between decreasing state subsidies and tuition increases. This clause creates a much weaker connection, however, than the connection created by the idiom used in the first statement. The phrase

implies that there are multiple explanations for the rapid increase in college tuition, with decreasing state funding being just one of them. Compared to the idiom used in the former statement, the latter statement does not create as strong a relationship between two things (state funding and tuition increases). As a result, the reader is again left with the impression that the authors of the Spellings Report are attributing much more of the blame for rising tuition on institutional inefficiency as opposed to decreasing state support.

The use of modal auxiliary verbs by the authors of the Spellings Report in their recommendations for making college more affordable provides a final example of the connection between institutional inefficiency and tuition increases. Modal auxiliary verbs are typically used to give additional information about the mood of the main verb and incorporate an added level of necessity to a main verb (Fairclough, 2001). In the Spellings Report (2006), very different modal auxiliary verbs are used when making recommendations about state funding vs. recommendations about institutional efficiency. Regarding state funding, this vocabulary is used: "However, based on our commission's review of the education needs of our nation, we *encourage* states to continue their historic and necessary commitment to the support of public higher education" (p. 10; emphasis added). In contrast, regarding the need to increase institutional efficiency, the following language is used (emphasis added):

> Policymakers and higher education leaders *should* develop, at the institutional level, new and innovative means to control costs, improve productivity, and increase the supply of higher education. (p. 20)

> Higher education institutions *should* improve institutional cost management through the development of new performance benchmarks designed to measure and improve productivity and efficiency. (p. 20)

While "encourage" is not a modal auxiliary verb in the classic sense, it does function as one in this context. The verb "encourage" signals an attempt to inspire or persuade states to continue their financial support of higher education. The verb "should," however, signals an imperative. In this case, the imperative is being placed on institutions to get costs under control and improve productivity. The language used here attempts to inspire or stimulate the state to continue funding higher education while flatly directing institutions to

become more efficient. By using the stronger modal auxiliary verb in reference to institutional activity, the report is identifying institutional inefficiency as the biggest contributor to tuition increases and the area in need of the most change if costs are to be brought under control. This tendency, along with the other examples detailed in this section, demonstrates the strong connection being created between institutional inefficiency and rising costs.

The building of this connection by the authors of the Spellings Report promotes the tenets of neoliberalism. The insinuation made by the vocabulary used in the Spellings Report is that colleges and universities are allowing their costs to spiral out of control primarily because of ineffective management. That is, if colleges and universities were to adopt the management styles of successful for-profit businesses, their costs would come under control, and they would become more productive and, eventually, more affordable. This idea that all industries, whether they be public, private, for-profit, or not-for-profit, should be managed according to the economic rationale of the market is at the heart of neoliberalism.

Significance

With regard to significance, the third of Gee's (2005) building tasks used in this analysis, the Spellings Report uses language that attributes higher education's significance almost exclusively to its function as a vehicle for national and individual economic prosperity while rendering nearly completely insignificant the non-economic benefits of higher education. The building of this type of significance begins in the Preamble of the report (Spellings, 2006).

> We acknowledge that not everyone needs to go to college. But everyone needs a postsecondary education. Indeed, we have seen ample evidence that some form of postsecondary instruction is increasingly vital to an individual's economic security. Yet too many Americans just aren't getting the education that they need—and that they deserve. (p. x)

The authors' goal for this paragraph is to lay out their rationale as to why they believe every American needs some form of postsecondary education. In this effort, they talk exclusively about the economic security an individual gains from postsecondary instruction. Other non-economic benefits associated with postsecondary education, such as better overall health, greater life expectancy, and increased knowledge of government and civic affairs, are not mentioned.

This theme is carried into the body of the report. In the Findings section, the following statement is used to describe in detail the benefits associated with higher education.

> The benefits of higher education are significant both for individuals and for the nation as a whole. In 2003, for example, the median annual salary of an American worker with only a high school diploma was $30,800, compared with the $37,600 median for those with an associate's degree and the $49,900 median for those with a bachelor's degree. Over a lifetime, an individual with a bachelor's degree will earn an average of $2.1 million—nearly twice as much as a worker with only a high school diploma. Higher education also produces broader social gains. (p. 7)

Throughout this piece of discourse exists an abundance of evidence that supports claims of the economic benefits of higher education and a lack of evidence that supports claims of its social benefits. When talking about the economic advantages of a college education, tangible numbers are provided. Statistical support is typically used to make a claim stronger and add significance to it. With regard to the social benefits of higher education, however, only one sentence ("Higher education also produces broader social gains" [Spellings, 2006, p. 7].) is offered and no evidence is given in support of the assertion. By substantiating claims about the economic benefits of higher education, the Spellings Report is again placing much more significance on them, as opposed to the non-economic benefits of a college education.

The above statement detailing the economic benefits of a college education is immediately followed by another very telling statement: "Colleges and universities are major economic engines, while also serving as civic and cultural centers" (p. 7). The main clause of this complex sentence is used to emphasize the importance of higher education as an engine of economic success for individuals and the nation. The subordinate adverb phrase is used to place the role of colleges and universities as civil and cultural centers in a lower position. Since main clauses are typically the primary idea of a sentence, and subordinate clauses typically express a secondary idea (Geller, 1967), the authors of the Spellings Report are relegating the civic and cultural functions of higher education institutions. This use of language again supports the assertion that the Spellings Report uses discourse to attribute higher education's significance primarily to its ability to provide economic benefits.

By assigning such significance to the economic benefits of college while treating the non-economic benefits of postsecondary education as much less significant, the Spellings Report is again conceptualizing higher education within neoliberal thought. As neoliberal discourse has become more and more prominent within higher education, there has been a fundamental shift in the way colleges and universities are defined and justified (Olssen & Peters, 2005). As a result, a traditional core mission of higher education, to seek and transmit knowledge unfettered by the need for commercial application, has been replaced by an emphasis on the commercial values of higher education for both individuals and society.

Negative Case Analysis of the Spellings Report

While the neoliberal perspective appears to be the dominant ideology of the Spellings Report, isolated instances of other political and economic ideologies are present. To increase the validity of my language-in-use analysis of the Spellings Report, I also performed a negative case analysis to identify instances of language that would not fit within the ideology of neoliberalism. In this analysis, I found few instances in which the authors of the Spellings Report employed non-neoliberal ideals.

In the Preamble, the authors stated: "What individuals would gain is full access to educational opportunities that allow them to be lifelong learners, productive workers, and engaged citizens" (Spellings, 2006, p. xiii). This sentence is the first and only reference in the report to lifelong learning or engaged citizenship as outcomes of higher education. Given the abundance of references to other, more neoliberal outcomes, however, this statement of more democratic ideals becomes lost in the report.

The Spellings Report's appeal for increased educational access for low-income and minority students also runs contrary to the neoliberal ideal of limiting mass education (Aronowitz, 1998; Giroux, 2003; Yokoyama, 2006).[1] As detailed earlier, however, increased educational access appears to be desirous exclusively because of the role of education in increasing work productivity among low-income and minority students. Therefore, while this language on the surface is a bit of a departure from neoliberalism, a more critical look indicates that even this language is grounded in neoliberal ideology.

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[1] Each of these authors argues that the ideals of neoliberalism support less access to higher education for populations marked by class and racial subordination.

The Consequences of Increased Neoliberal Discourse in Higher Education

The findings of this language-in-use discourse analysis suggest that the language used throughout the Spellings Report contextualizes higher education within the tenets of neoliberalism. These findings support the findings of scholars who have detailed the ascension of neoliberal ideology within discourse in and about higher education (see Ayers, 2005; Giroux, 2002; Hursh, 2007; Olssen & Peters, 2005). As this discourse becomes the norm, it has the potential to have several adverse effects on U.S. higher education.

One of these potential negative effects is a threat to students' perspectives on their roles within society. As the individualist logic of neoliberalism becomes more prevalent within higher education, colleges and universities may lose their ability to instill within students an understanding of their responsibility for the social good. As the discourse around higher education becomes further dominated by the ideals of neoliberalism, students may begin to view their personal and professional lives according to neoliberal ideals. Their educational and social lives, then, would be based on their economic value. Once students' social lives have been reconstituted as economic, it becomes exceedingly difficult for them to reflect on themselves and their communities except from an economic perspective (Baez, 2007). The ideals of engaged citizenship are replaced by a view of other citizens as little more than "competition" that must be defeated in order to achieve economic success. In addition, neoliberalism is troublesome in terms of its possible effects on the moral behavior of students. Since "the markets do not reward moral behavior" (Giroux, 2001, p. 32), as students develop a view of themselves as entirely economic entities, morality and ethical behavior could become of lesser importance and consequence.

Neoliberalism also poses a threat to the academic freedom that college and university faculties have historically enjoyed. As mentioned earlier, neoliberalism identifies valuable knowledge as that which reflects the needs of employers. Consequently, the liberal arts curriculum and academic disciplines within the humanities and the social sciences become less emphasized and risk being underfunded or completely eliminated by the "corporate college" mentality. If these areas of inquiry do not persist in the university setting, higher education will be weakened in its ability to preserve, advance, and transmit important social and cultural knowledge. In addition, higher

education will also lose its role as critical examiner of U.S. society. For example, it was the sociological research coming from colleges and universities in the 1950s and 1960s that helped expose the prejudiced attitudes of racist leaders in the South and helped facilitate the Civil Rights movement (Allen, 2000). If these disciplines are treated as less significant within the neoliberal college or university, such forms of scholarship will likely not be conducted.

Other higher education experts have explored issues such as neoliberalism's effect on student access, the use of part-time faculty, and the censorship of research results at odds with commercial interests (see Engel, 2000; Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Olssen & Peters, 2005). Each of these issues constitutes additional evidence of the negative consequences that could occur if the tenets of neoliberalism become the operating norms of U.S. colleges and universities.

Conclusion

The application of neoliberal ideology within higher education discourse is not an entirely new phenomenon. It has, however, become much more abundant in recent years (Giroux, 2002; Olssen & Peters, 2005). An example of this trend can be found by examining the final report of Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings' Commission on the Future of Higher Education, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. I have shown in this article that the Spellings Report builds identities, creates connections, and attributes significance in a way that emphasizes the ideology of neoliberalism to the near exclusion of other economic or philosophical ideals.

As this neoliberal discourse becomes the norm within and around the higher education community, this type of language has the potential to have important consequences for the ways in which colleges and universities are viewed by the public. While U.S. higher education has been characterized in the past by its careful balance between the neoliberal values of profit and efficiency and the more democratic values of academic quality and learning for its own sake, the current dominance of neoliberal discourse around higher education has made dominant the view that students are simply consumers of subjects, teaching is a market-driven practice, and learning is a form of training (Giroux, 2001). Given the ability of discourse to shape (and not just reflect) reality (Fairclough, 1995, 2001), it is essential that alternative discourses emphasizing the democratic ideals of higher education be used to counterbalance the neoliberal discourse currently rampant

throughout higher education (Ayers, 2005). These discourses should come from institutional leaders, politicians, scholars, and others who believe in higher education as more than merely an engine for economic development, but instead, an essential tool in raising the intellectual tone of society, cultivating the public mind, enhancing private life, and encouraging the civic courage and informed citizenship vital to a successful democracy.

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