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“Corporatizing” College—abstract

For award consideration

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“Higher education is facing an existential crisis.” — Tom Schneller, contingent faculty union member and music lecturer

Political Rancor

The changing model of higher education is a hotly debated issue on campus—so much so that community members fail to speak about it in anything but partisan terms. The issue is a form of politics wholly unique to higher education and yet representative of the larger American political discourse. Administrators perceived as aloof argue on behalf of fiscal responsibility while grassroots activism from faculty and students ask for social justice.

The goals behind the presentation are: to understand and explain where Ithaca College fits into a larger sociological moment of higher education and to render comprehensible the seemingly esoteric knowledge of economics and finances. It is the conceit of the research displayed in this presentation that to provide trenchant analysis of Ithaca College’s present moment is to deliver ourselves from political rancor.

The underlying clash over how Ithaca College is to conduct its noble mission — and the mission of higher education as a whole — is the topic being debated in real time for the IC community. Because its implications reflect larger societal conflicts, this attempted reconciliation of alienated parties is the first step to institute a culture of understanding in the larger society.

Background for Research

The research behind this topic, under the pseudonym “corporatization”, began journalistically. I was a news reporter for The Ithacan researching the college’s budgets for several different stories. The college’s endowment, fundraising projects and tuition increase all became central to my research and interviews.

Amidst the scatter plots of numbers and data, the budgets came together to tell a harrowing story of quenched resources following the 2008 recession. The world of nonprofit finances was enthralling because it was a realm without final solutions and instead infinite tradeoffs.

Thus, studying the budgets and reading about financial trends in economic journals drove me hours into the early hours of the morning, drafting spreadsheets and playing back interviews with administrators. Thus, I was on the brink of understanding the ideological clashes occurring at Ithaca College. The extended news article I wrote became a [founding story](#) for a new magazine on campus, The Ithaca College Chronicle, and one of the most exemplary of the mission statement.

This presentation is the work of a young scholar, faithful to the relevant to the academic fields, and a journalist attempting to render his work for public access. It combines elements of cultural ethnography and academic journal. Anthony DiRenzo, chair of the committee for faculty excellence and professor of writing, shared the piece with his committee because he said it was a fair analysis of a topic which has otherwise been the source of disjunction.

What is the “corporatization” of higher education?

The changing model of higher education is criticized as applying the “Walmart model” of governance to colleges and universities. It is rooted in the responses from administrators to capricious market forces of nonprofit higher education. These market forces include:

- Oscillating numbers of students who can pay the full tuition price.
- A relatively small endowment.
- A relatively small alumni network.
- The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

Responses from administrators include:

- Broad administrative control.
- Increased investment in fundraising.
- More administrative positions.
- Decreased emphasis on classroom learning and low faculty morale.
- Increased attention on hands-on learning.
- Increased dependence on contingent faculty members.

“In this new model, a college’s mission to educate its students is supposedly compromised. Supposedly, students are reduced to customers purchasing a commodified college experience provided by administrative executives. These executives then profit from climbing tuition, and their professors are relegated to mid and low-level employee status,” I wrote in my article, “‘Corporatizing’ College: The story of ideological divide at Ithaca College”.

The years following the 2008 financial crisis brought forth a new chapter for Ithaca College's governance model with the goal of securing long term sources of funding while providing high-quality education for students. The necessity for long-term funding sources manifested in the controversial presidency of Tom Rochon and college's "strategic vision" — IC 20/20.

Conclusion

This is the defining conflict of the current era of Ithaca College's history. The presentation is an awakening to all listeners and readers to take heed of where they fit into the broader sociology of Ithaca College and the sordid history of nonprofit higher education.

Ithaca College is right now at a crossroads. Many professors are nostalgic about a golden age of higher education when humanistic scholarship was at the center of a college's daily operations while the arc of higher education is gradually bending in a different direction.

"If there are any students reading this who are hoping to become professors, please understand that the struggle of contingent faculty at Ithaca College is not only about us — we are also fighting for the future of academia, which we have entered willingly because we love and value knowledge, and consider teaching a noble profession." — Tom Schneller in an [oped in The Chronicle](#).