

# **Neoliberal Ideology and Public Higher Education in the United States**

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## **Introduction**

Over the past thirty years, neoliberalism has become the dominant hegemony in the United States and much of the world (Harvey, 2005). During this time, the classical liberalism that defined United States economic and social policy during the nineteenth and early twentieth century has been revitalized, intensified, and its scope has been extended (Baez, 2007; Turner, 2008). This has resulted in drastic cuts to state supported social services and programs, the extension an economic rationality to cultural, social, and political spheres, and the redefinition of the individual from a citizen to an autonomous economic actor (Baez, 2007; Lemke, 2001; Turner, 2008). As the neoliberal hegemony increasingly shaped individuals' common sense, commodification, commercialization, and marketization, as well as the extension of market logic and the prioritization of economic outcomes, have come to redefine the purpose and role of social, cultural, and political institutions (Apple, 2001; Aronowitz, 2000; Giroux, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Despite unparalleled economic inequality, the lack of any real dollar increase in workers' wages, enormous growth in personal debt, and the massive amount of power that has shifted from the state to multinational corporations and global financial institutions (Dumenil & Levy, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Palley, 2005; Przeworski, 1992), neoliberalism continues to be the dominant hegemony in the United States.

As neoliberal policies, practices, and ideas developed in the United States, a parallel process of neoliberal development occurred in U.S. public higher education. Throughout the past four decades, the economics, structure, and purpose of higher education, as well as the priorities and identities of faculty and students, have been altered to better align with neoliberal practices and ideology. These changes have not fundamentally transformed the economic and social role of higher education in the United States, as the current colleges and universities hold a purpose similar to what it was in 1976 when Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis published their powerful critique of education in the United States. Instead, these changes have substantially altered the conditions in which these roles can be actualized, creating a system of higher education that is better understood as an accentuation of the previous model of higher education, which has always served the interests of capital and the ruling class.

While it is misleading to discuss the neoliberal university as a fundamentally new incarnation of higher education in the United States, meaningful changes have occurred over the past forty years that have aligned the university with neoliberal ideology resulting in important differences between the neoliberal university and its predecessors. To make up for the decrease in funds that resulted from the drastic decrease in funding of social services under the neoliberal regime (Levin, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), colleges and universities have prioritized revenue generation and have become increasingly reliant on private sources of funding (Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Hill, 2003; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Congruent with the focus of revenue generation was the growing importance of economic efficiency, which provided the rationale to use more part-time and adjunct faculty (Aronowitz, 2000; Giroux, 2005; McLaren, 2005; Rhoades, 2004). The focus on efficiency has extended to institutional decision-making, with systems of shared governance being overshadowed by more hierarchical models (Ayers, 2004; Currie, 1998; Eckel, 2000; Gumpert, 1993). Faculty priorities mirrored those of their institution, and in the name of revenue generation, they focused on applied and commercialized research (Alexander, 2001; Clark, 1998; Slaughter, 1998; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), while the tenure system was simultaneously attacked as economically irrational (Horowitz, 2004; Tierney, 1998). Students have undergone a parallel shift, now increasingly focused on the extrinsic outcomes of higher education as they reduce their concern for the intrinsic rewards of the college experience (Astin, 1998). In general, a college education has increasingly been viewed as a private good to be purchased by a student who was redefined as a customer (Chaffee, 1998; Swagler, 1978; Wellen, 2005).

These changes have been increasingly researched by higher education scholars and widely discussed in higher education literature, though only a relatively few scholars attribute such changes to the rise and dominance of neoliberalism (i.e. Aronowitz, 2000; Baez, 2007; Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Hill, 2003; Kezar, 2004; Levidow, 2005; Levin, 2005; McLaren, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). The preponderance of literature on American public higher education neglects neoliberalism altogether and as such misplaces the source of many changes to public colleges and universities in the United States (i.e. Astin, 1998; Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Chaffee, 1998; Clark, 1998; Paulson & St. John, 2002; Washburn, 2006). In both cases, scholars often focus narrowly on one aspect of higher education – faculty, governance, administration, or

students, and do not provide a broad overview of the changes that have occurred within higher education or the ways in which they mutually reinforce one another. The purpose of this paper is to bridge the gap between these two bodies of literature by providing a comprehensive yet accessible discussion of neoliberal ideology and its impact on higher education in the United States. First, it begins with a basic overview of the ideology of neoliberalism, which is often either completely unknown or largely misunderstood by higher education scholars and practitioners (particularly in the United States). Many discussions of ideology assume a familiarity with the concept, as do many discussions of neoliberalism, making such accounts fairly inaccessible to those who lack the required previous knowledge. Following this overview is an exploration into the ways in which neoliberalism has been able to remain the dominant ideology in the United States. Understanding the tactics used to perpetuate neoliberalism will enable the reader to better understand neoliberal ideology as well as the ways in which it has permeated throughout the United States and much of the world. The last section builds upon this understanding to discuss the meaningful changes that have occurred within public higher education in the United States over the past forty years, including changes to the funding, finances, priorities, and governance of colleges and universities, as well as the faculty and students who engage with these institutions.

While this paper focuses on the manifestations of neoliberal ideology on higher education in the United States, neoliberal ideology has assaulted colleges and universities around the world. From Australia and New Zealand (Marginson, 2004), to North and South America (Torres & Schugurensky, 2002), to Western Europe (Hill, 2003), neoliberalism has radically changed higher education around the world (Hill & Kumar, 2009; Olssen & Peters, 2005). When reading these accounts, it becomes quite clear that while many parallels concerning the manifestations of neoliberal ideology in higher education exist between nations, the specific conditions within each country has led to a corresponding particular series of neoliberal materializations within colleges and universities. This paper focuses on the specific manifestations occurring within higher education in the United States, though at times draws on parallel transformations around the world.

## **Neoliberalism**

Beginning in the 1970s and continuing until today, neoliberalism has become the dominant hegemony in the United States (Harvey, 2005; Saad-Filho & Johnson, 2005). ‘Neoliberalism’ is a term that is used to encompass a variety of economic, social, and political ideas, policies, and practices, functioning on both individual and institutional levels (Plehwe, Walpen, & Neunhoffer, 2006; Saad-Filho & Johnson, 2005). It is less like a singular set of ideas derived from one source and more like a plural set of concepts stemming from numerous sources that are located in varying aspects of our lives (Plehwe, Walpen, & Neunhoffer, 2006). The policies and practices of neoliberalism operate at local, state, national, and global levels, making their identification and elucidation extremely difficult. The complex assemblage of various ideas, policies, and practices that, like any hegemony, are in a constant state of change confounds attempts to define a consistent set of fundamental aspects of neoliberalism (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004). This is not to say that neoliberalism lacks coherent and identifiable dimensions, only that these dimensions act as parameters within which neoliberal concepts, policies, practices, and institutions operate.

While neoliberalism refers to a varied collection of ideas, practices, policies, and discursive representations (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004), this collection is united by three broad beliefs: the benevolence of the free market, minimal state intervention and regulation of the economy, and the individual as a rational economic actor (Harvey, 2005; Turner, 2008). In the United States where liberalism is a political orientation stripped of most economic meaning, the term “neoliberalism” is often confusing. Its root, liberalism, comes from the classical liberal economic theory of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and the Manchester School that is based around free markets and minimal state intervention in the economy (Palley, 2005). The neo or new aspect of this liberalism comes from the ways in which neoliberalism alters the liberal economic theory to correspond to new material conditions (Turner, 2008). Created in the mid 1970s as a response to economic stagflation in which a steep recession is combined with a rise in prices, neoliberalism is a return to and extension of the laissez faire economic theory that reigned until the 1930s but adapted to a new economic and social world (Harman, 2008; O’Connor, 2002). The most powerful of these extensions is the expansion of economic rationality past the economic sphere and into the social sphere (Lemke, 2001). In a neoliberal world, there is no longer a distinction between the market and the state, between the public and private, and

between the individual and the social (Lemke, 2001). As Baez (2007) states, “The U.S. neoliberalism re-defines the social as an economic domain, governed by the ‘rational choices’ of entrepreneurial individuals who see everything they do in terms of maximizing their ‘human capital’” (p. 7).

### *Expanding the Free Market*

Just as in classical liberalism, the most fundamental aspect of neoliberalism is what Karl Polanyi (1944) called the “self-regulating market.” Proponents of neoliberalism view the market as the natural and inevitable organizing and evaluative force in all social, cultural, and economic matters. They have complete faith in free trade and believe that competition will naturally lead to economic growth, global prosperity, and will necessarily benefit all individuals (Shaikh, 2005). If such growth and prosperity does not occur, they contend it is due to outside interference in the market’s operations, which are naturally and internally regulated (Harman, 2008). Believers of neoliberalism also believe that the market is inherently efficient and as such will create the maximum amount of wealth (Przeworski, 1992). This is not to say that the market will eliminate economic inequality (quite the opposite is true in that a certain level of unemployment is required in any capitalist system), but rather that the free market will allegedly ensure that such inequality is based on the amount of effort or “hard work” one exerts and the level of natural ability with which one is born. As such, state intervention, trade unions, and social welfare programs are unnatural distortions to the market and must be eliminated (Friedman, 1962; Hayek, 1944). Supporters of neoliberalism fiercely believe that these intrusions into the market not only restrict proper market operations, but also restrict individuals from freely engaging with the market (Hayek, 1944), as free-market relationships are the expression of a truly free society.

Neoliberalism radically expands the classical liberal idea that the market is the governing mechanism of the economy to include every aspect of society (Baez, 2007). Polanyi (1944) foretold this in his discussions of the logical extensions of a free market society, “Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economy” (p. 60). The expansion of the market results in the commodification and marketization of not only goods, services, and labor, but also of culture, relationships, and social institutions (such as

schools and prisons) (Baez, 2007). The same market forces that allegedly determine the price of goods and services while maximizing economic efficiency also maximize our personal efficiency by guiding us to make the best personal and social decisions. As Lemke (2001) describes, in a neoliberal world there is no longer a distinction between the economy and society; everything is economic.

### *Redefining the Role of the State*

A central tenet of neoliberalism is the restriction of state interference in the economy. To this end, the social programs and regulations, including welfare, social security, as well as labor and environmental safeguards, should be abolished or privatized (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004). Many scholars interpret such changes as the undermining of the state and the severe weakening of its power (i.e. Harvey, 2005; Giroux, 2005; McLaren, 2005). This is true to some extent, as a number of the state's previous functions are privatized, marketized, and substantially redefined. However, this indicates a changing role of the state and not necessarily a weakening of the state's power (Baez, 2007). As its former functions are redefined, the state remains strong, though the use of its power is now channeled in different ways using a different logic: economic rationality (Baez, 2007). According to this logic, social programs such as welfare and public health care are economically irrational and therefore should be eliminated. State power should focus on facilitating the operation of the market and the securing ability of individuals to operate freely within it, including creating new markets through the use of the military (Klein, 2007), establishing free trade agreements with different nations (Harvey, 2005), and restructuring the tax system and regulations to support corporations (Turner, 2008). These are all legitimate uses of state power within neoliberal ideology, and all require a strong state.

### *The Neoliberal Individual: Homo Oeconomicus*

The most distinctively neoliberal phenomenon is the redefinition of the individual as *homo oeconomicus*, a rational economic actor whose behaviors, both economic and non-economic, are determined by a cost/benefit analysis (Lemke, 2001). The economic rationality that neoliberalism expands to the social sphere extends to individuals, who should rationally and consciously calculate the costs and benefits of all their choices, actions, and beliefs (Lemke, 2001). As Baez (2007) states, "If all social life is to be understood economically, then the social

domain, like the economic one, is governed by the ‘rational choices’ of entrepreneurial individuals who see everything they do in terms of maximizing their ‘human capital,’ and it is to be judged under this logic” (p. 10). Through minimal state intervention in their lives, individuals are “free” to pursue their interests, though they must bear the costs and responsibility to do so (Fitzsimons, 2002). Since individuals are autonomous, they no longer need to rely on a larger society or to work together to attend to their common issues, problems, and needs nor do they belong to any particular class. In a neoliberal world, there are no social problems, only individual challenges, and there cannot be a social solution to an individual challenge without restricting the individual’s freedom.

Neoliberal ideology attempts to redefine individuals as consumers (Giroux, 2005); just as if they were purchasing a product, they use a cost/benefit analysis to determine what choice is rational (personally beneficial according to neoliberal logic). This applies to everything in their lives – from personal relationships, to educational and professional decisions, to determining how leisure time will be spent; the individual is always acting in ways to enhance her human capital. This logic is embedded in phrases such as “I don’t buy it” referring to not believing a statement is true, “what’s the deal with that” referring to questioning what is occurring with a specific situation, “stakeholders” referring to social groups, “buying into” policies or changes in order for them to be successful, and “investing” in relationships or activities that require time and energy. These are but a few examples in which market metaphors and economic rationality are used to define how people express their beliefs, how social groups are defined, how individuals make their decisions, and how people engage with one another in social and professional settings. Economic rationality defines every aspect of life, and the individual becomes *homo oeconomicus*.

### **Perpetuating Neoliberal Ideology**

Neoliberalism is often discussed as the dominant hegemony in the United States and its ideology as the foundation to American’s beliefs and actions (i.e. Apple, 2004; Chomsky, 1998; Giroux, 2005, Harvey, 2005; McLaren, 2005; Peck & Tickell, 2002), though few people self-identify as neoliberals and most Americans are unfamiliar with the term (Chomsky, 1998). At the surface, these phenomena might appear to be incongruent. How can the defining beliefs of American

society not be consciously and explicitly stated by those who seem to believe in them? People identify as liberals or conservatives, as Republicans or Democrats, but few call themselves Neoliberals. They may believe in aspects of neoliberalism, including faith in the free market, deregulation, and a limited role of the state, but it is questionable if they believe in the extreme neoliberal variations of these classic liberal ideas or support their outcomes. If people do not state that they are neoliberals or believe in the core ideas of neoliberalism, how can it be the dominant ideology? The answer to this apparent paradox is found in the characteristics and tactics of neoliberal ideology, including excluding alternatives and rival forms of thought, legitimizing the neoliberal structure and outcomes, obfuscating the impacts of neoliberalism (Eagleton, 1991), as well as in the way neoliberalism has so saturated our consciousness that it defines our common sense beliefs and becomes indivisible from our basic ideas and fundamental assumptions (Apple, 2004).

A powerful tactic used by proponents of any ideology is to exclude rival forms of thought (Eagleton, 1991). Such exclusion limits perceived alternatives and enables a specific set of beliefs to define the common sense approaches to and understandings of the world.

Neoliberalism has risen to a dominant position partly because its supporters have been so successful at excluding rival forms of thought and claiming that it is the only possible social and economic system (Harvey, 2005). This is best exemplified through one of the signature phrases of neoliberalism often attributed to Margaret Thatcher: “There is no alternative” or TINA (Apple, 2004; Munck, 2005). TINA became the slogan for radical changes to U.S. and British economic policies, including severe cuts to social programs, attacks on organized labor, and the privatization of public services and resources. The economic stagflation of the 1970s provided an opportunity for proponents of neoliberalism to declare that Keynesian economic policies have and will always fail (O’Connor, 2002). They claimed that the only option to revitalize the economy and return prosperity to the U.S. and Britain economies was an orthodox return to classic liberal economic policies (Harvey, 2005). Aided by the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, proponents of neoliberalism proclaimed that in a free world there was no plausible alternative to neoliberalism (Munck, 2005).

Merely claiming, “there is no alternative” does not necessarily make people blindly believe it is true. The claim has to appear true if it is to be accepted by a vast proportion of people. This apparent truth comes from the way neoliberal ideology, just as any successful ideology, is based partly in people’s lived experiences (Eagleton, 1991). Successful ideologies are grounded in our general individual experiences and attempt to reconstitute and represent them in a way that extracts consent to certain policies, institutions, and ideas. Specifically, neoliberalism was allegedly born out of necessity from the severe economic stagflation of the 1970s, (Harman, 2008, O’Connor, 2002). Given the difficult economic times and the bleak projections for the future, people were ready to reject policies that they were repeatedly told led to the economic downturn. When provided with an alternative that appeared to solve both the larger economic woes as well as personal financial issues they welcomed change (Harman, 2008). The economic recovery that partially occurred in the 1980s and to a greater extent in the 1990s seemingly provided evidence of neoliberalism’s suitability and reinforced the original claims of the inherent benefits of a neoliberal world. The dominant discourse highlighted how unemployment was low, the Clinton administration had balanced the national budget, the stock market was booming, and the economy in general seemed to be thriving (Dumenil & Levy, 2005). Provided with this seemingly compelling evidence, the acceptance of neoliberalism is understandable; it is reasonable for people to desire change when the current economic system is failing them, just as it is reasonable for them to believe the new system works when they appear to benefit from it.

All successful ideologies obscure the true economic and social impacts of their implementation (Eagleton, 1991), and neoliberalism is no different. The dominant discourse of neoliberalism provides only a partial picture of its record as social and economic policy in the United States, and it is this fragmented truth that better allows for the extraction of consent from the masses. If more attention were to be given to the extreme concentration of wealth, massive inequality, lack of a rise in real wages, enormous growth in personal debt, and the restriction of most economic prosperity to wealthy individuals and financial institutions during neoliberalism’s tenure (Dumenil & Levy, 2005; Harvey, 2005), people may be less willing to accept the neoliberal ideology. To ensure that these outcomes of neoliberal policies and institutions are removed from the dominant discourse, the media, schools, and other ideological institutions are utilized to hide and distort the true impact of neoliberalism (Aronowitz, 2000; Herman & Chomsky, 1988;

McChesney, 2004). The reality conveyed through these institutions is only a partial picture of the neoliberal world, as they obfuscate the devastating impacts of neoliberalism while highlighting any beneficial outcomes that could possibly be related to it. When this occurs, people are more likely to accept the neoliberal regime, thus reducing any immediate need to question it or create alternative systems.

Obscuring reality and distorting the truth concerning the economic and social conditions that sprung from neoliberalism can at best be only partially successful, as the institutions that are used to distort the truth cannot completely shape individuals' understandings of the world (Giroux, 2005). This understanding will be informed by their own experiences and observations, which will often be incongruent with the dominant discourse provided by ideological institutions (Cheal, 1979). When such an incongruity arises, people may be more likely to question the world around them and act in ways to change it. To combat this potential resistance, when this incongruence occurs and when the inequalities and injustices created by neoliberalism are too extreme to be concealed, attempts are made to legitimize them (Eagleton, 1991). One such attempt can be seen by examining the rationales used to explain the substantial inequality of wealth in the United States. Devoted followers of neoliberalism attempt to prove the legitimacy of the extreme disparities in wealth through a fairly simple argument, though one with extremely contested premises that often go uncontested. The argument begins with the assertion that neoliberalism allegedly frees the individual from the oppressive interference of the state allowing each person to realize their personal autonomy (Baez, 2007), and since individuals within neoliberalism are rational, autonomous economic actors (Lemke, 2001), they will not discriminate based on race, ethnicity, gender, or any other identity. Such discrimination, the ideology continues, makes no economic sense and violates the economic logic by making decisions and distinctions based on social or cultural identities and not solely in fiscal terms. With no discrimination, so long as the state does not interfere, everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed and realize the American dream (Hayek, 1944).

Next comes the claim that the market is self-regulating, ensuring that the distribution of wealth is a legitimate product of free competition (Turner, 2008). Since everyone has equal opportunity and the means for acquiring wealth are just and fair, the unequal distribution of wealth is

necessarily legitimate. A corollary to this conclusion is that any inequalities of wealth are a result of individuals not working hard enough, and they can remedy their situation by changing their personal approach to the world – the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality (Hayek, 1944). If in the rare chance someone does work hard and does not succeed, the assumption is that it is not due to any structural inequality but only to a deficiency in his or her natural abilities. Further, these free market fundamentalists allege that the wealth that is created at the top of the economic strata will trickle down to the lower classes, believing that what is good for the wealthy is inevitably good for the poor (Friedman, 1962). This basic line of reasoning largely shields neoliberalism from claims that it intentionally helps the wealthy at the expense of the poor, uses the structural inequalities embedded in U.S. society to exploit individuals and social groups, and forsakes the welfare of the individuals for the sake of creating profit (Chomsky, 1998; Giroux, 2005).

The expansion of economic rationality into cultural, political, and social spheres is the most distinctive aspect of neoliberalism and one of its most powerful ideological tools (Baez, 2007). The universalization of economic logic helps to create the appearance that it is the natural approach to the world. Since alternatives are excluded and the same logic is used in every aspect of life, it easily becomes assumed that such rationality must be in some way innate to human beings. This assumption is seen through the rise of “social Darwinism,” the belief that competition is part of human nature (Hofstadter, 1992), and the idea that unfettered free-market capitalism is an inherent part of a free world (Hayek, 1944), as well as in the fundamental assumptions of certain rational choice and human capital theories that insist all action is guided by cost/benefit analysis (Bowles & Gintis, 1975; Munro, 2004). The pervasiveness of economic rationality culminates in “saturat[ion] of our consciousness, so that the educational, economic and social world we see and interact with, and the commonsense interpretations we put on it becomes...the only world” (Apple, 2004, p. 4). This is the epitome of ideology; neoliberalism defines not only the social, economic, and political institutions and policies, but it is also used to dictate the manner by which individuals make day-to-day decisions and structure their lives. Moreover, since neoliberalism engulfs every aspect of life, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify the origins of one’s beliefs. The ideology appears ahistorical; it has no beginning and no end, but instead is a natural part of the world (Eagleton, 1991).

These tactics work to embed the fundamental assumptions of neoliberalism into our consciousness, attempting to redefine our common sense along neoliberal lines. However, these efforts can be countered. The argument that attempts to legitimize the inequalities that result from neoliberalism has been largely disproven by examining the economic outcomes of neoliberal policies (Palley, 2005; Przeworski, 1992). The idea that there is no alternative has been shown to be false (MacEwan, 1999; Munch, 2005; Peck & Tickell, 2002) through the existence of alternate economic models throughout the world. What is most difficult to overcome is the most powerful aspect of neoliberal ideology: the pervasiveness of economic rationality into all aspects of life.

Through understanding neoliberalism as, in part, an ideology, the apparent contradiction between the pervasiveness of neoliberal thought and the widespread lack of acknowledgement or recognition of that thought is resolved. This understanding also helps explain the pervasiveness of neoliberal logic throughout various aspects of life, as well as the way in which neoliberalism has been able to maintain its hegemonic position in the United States despite its widespread failure and devastating effects (Palley, 2005; Przeworski, 1992; Shaikh, 2005). This is not to say that neoliberalism is only an ideology or that its ideological components are its most powerful or important aspects, as the institutions, policies, and practices of neoliberalism have been extremely devastating around the world (Harvey, 2005). Instead, it is meant to show that through understanding the ideology of neoliberalism and the ways in which it has been perpetuated we can better understand the ways it has infiltrated our institutions, discourse, and common sense.

### **Neoliberalism and Higher Education**

As neoliberalism increasingly became the dominant socio-economic policy of the United States and as its ideology became increasingly accepted, a parallel process of neoliberal development and infusion of economic rationality has occurred within higher education. While few scholars (i.e. Aronowitz, 2000; Ayers, 2005; Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Hill, 2003; Levin, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) identify neoliberalism as a source of widespread changes to the economics, structure, and purpose of higher education over the past thirty years, these changes are well

documented in higher education literature (Alexander, 2001; Astin, 1998; Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Gumport, 1993; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Paulson & St. John, 2002; Tierney, 1998). As a part of the general reduction in funding social services and what were once considered public goods, public higher education has seen drastic cuts in state funding (Levin, 2005). The privatization and commercialization of previously publicly funded institutions extended to higher education, and as a result, these institutions became increasingly reliant on private funds (Aronowitz, 2000; Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Hill, 2003; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). A substantial portion of those funds came from applied research that was financially supported and subsequently owned by private corporations (Clark, 1998; Slaughter, 1998; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). The role of the faculty and their institutional priorities were altered, with heavy emphasis placed on generating revenue and a lesser role in institutional decision-making (Alexander, 2001; Aronowitz, 2000; Levin, 2006). The tenure system, which neoliberals argued is economically irrational and a “bad investment” (Horowitz, 2004; Tierney, 1998) came under attack. Economic efficiency became a high priority for colleges and universities, which provided the rationale to use an unprecedented amount of part-time and adjunct faculty (Aronowitz, 2000; Bousquet, 2008; Giroux, 2005; McLaren, 2005; Rhoades, 2006) as well as to attack systems of shared governance (Ayers, 2005; Currie, 1998; Eckel, 2000; Gumport, 1993). A college education was increasingly seen as a private good to be purchased by a student, who was redefined as a customer (Chaffee, 1998; Swagler, 1978; Wellen, 2005). Students, as rational economic actors, changed their goals from what were largely intrinsic, such as developing a meaningful philosophy of life, to larger extrinsic goals including being very well off financially (Astin, 1998, Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Saunders, 2007). All of these are direct results of individuals and institutions using neoliberal policies and an economic rationality to make educational decisions, including attempts to treat and govern the university just like any traditional business, its faculty as traditional workers, and its students as customers (Lohmann, 2004; Winston, 1999).

Many of the scholars (i.e. Aronowitz, 2000; Giroux, 2005; Kezar, 2004) who discuss the impact of neoliberalism on higher education juxtapose the neoliberal university, which focuses on meeting the needs of the market, technical education and job training, and revenue generation with a previous university that allegedly focused on civic engagement, democratic education, and

learning for its own sake. To some extent, this contrast is accurate, as the intense focus on revenue generation and the embracing of an economic rationality has led to dramatic changes in institutional priorities and a vocationalization of the curriculum that was not present in previous incarnations of the university. However, the claim that universities were ever such democratic institution with altruistic aims is questionable. As Barrow (1990) discusses, the corporatization of American higher education began in earnest at the beginning of the expansion of public education in the nineteenth century. Similarly, Bowles and Gintis (1976) chronicle the vocalization of the curriculum, corporatization of governing boards, and the focus on marketable technologies and meeting the needs of capital beginning over a hundred years before the rise of neoliberalism. These accounts help demonstrate that the changes that have occurred due to neoliberalism are not fundamental transformations of the roles and purposes of the university, but instead are substantial accentuations of its previous functions. To say that the development of the neoliberal university and the changes that define it are unique is to both misunderstand the history of higher education in the United States as well as to misplace the source of many functions of higher education. What is new to the neoliberal university is the scope and extent of these profit-driven, corporate ends, as well as how many students, faculty, administrators, and policy makers explicitly support and embrace these capitalistic goals and priorities. The following sections will outline changes to the funding, finances, and priorities of higher education institutions, shifts in the decision-making processes and systems of shared governance of colleges and universities, alterations in faculty composition, roles, and priorities, and changes in students goals, motivations, and identities within their institutions. These sections will provide a basic discussion of the manifestations and impact of neoliberal ideology on public higher education in the United States.

### *Funding, Finances, and Revenue Generation*

The logic utilized by those who sought a neoliberal reformation of governmental social welfare functions has been extended to higher education, resulting in fundamental shifts in the funding and financing of higher education (Levin, 2005). Congruent with the general divestment in social institutions, real dollar allocations to higher education – allocations adjusted for inflation – from state and federal governments have decreased over the past thirty years (Aronowitz, 2000; Rhoades & Slaughter, 1997). These funding cuts provided the material rationalization to the

ideological shifts occurring within higher education, most notably to need to increasingly focus on the generation of revenue and to have a steadfast devotion to the efficient use of funds (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Further, these material shifts helped usher in a market-based approach to higher education. The reduction in state support led to dramatic increases in the price of tuition and fees (Alexander, 2001; Winston, 1999) as well as changes to the financial aid system (Paulson & St. John, 2002), which increasingly made the student the chief financier of her own education (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Just as with any economic exchange in the neoliberal world, the state should restrict its interference with the interactions between customer and supplier. Instead, the student, who is redefined as a customer, should bear the full responsibility of funding her education, which is viewed as any product sold on the open market. Further, the increased cost of attendance coupled with the prioritization of maximizing revenues has led institutions to alter admissions policies and priorities by focusing on full-paying and well-qualified students who will cost less to serve (Levin, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). While all of these changes were arguably done out of necessity, they are all supported by and congruent with neoliberal ideology. It was and is the TINA of higher education – with falling state support there is no alternative but to focus on private revenue generation. The continuation of these alleged necessary changes even in times of economic prosperity and by institutions that do not face financial difficulties (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) clearly demonstrates that they were not just born out of necessity, but were independent alterations stemming from a fundamental shift of the logic governing public higher education.

Revenue generation, efficiency, and competition define the priorities of all types of higher education institutions, from community colleges to research universities. Community colleges, which had never focused on generating revenue in any meaningful way, now exhibited an increased faculty and institutional orientation to entrepreneurialism (Levin, 2006). Community colleges have always played a major role in meeting the needs of capital and perpetuating structural inequities that enable the neoliberal structure to survive (see Brint & Karabel, 1989), but until recently, they had not focused on corporate goals of revenue generation and competition. Regarding research universities, whereas the non-revenue generating functions of the institution, most notably the liberal arts, were once a foundation of the university and received adequate institutional support, institutions have shifted their resources and allocations

away from these areas and expanded departments that have the potential to bring in funds to the university (Levin, 2005; Mignolo, 2000; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). To maximize revenue generation, institutions increasingly focus on applied research with the explicit goal of commercializing the research products (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Applied research is conducted at the expense of basic research, which had traditionally served a broader public purpose and which is not quickly or easily marketable (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Coupled with the commodification of research is a redefinition of research results, discoveries, and creations, which were once allegedly public goods (though we must be critical of this claim) intended to be shared openly and freely with the aim of best promoting the well-being of society (Kezar, 2004). In a neoliberal world, the fruits of research are no longer integral parts of the “general quest for knowledge” (Kezar, 2004, p.441) but become pieces of "intellectual property" that should be sold on the open market.

The commodification and the subsequent marketization of research was largely enabled by two acts of Congress, the Bayh-Dole Act (1980) and the National Cooperative Research Act (1984), that can be understood as the expression of neoliberal ideology. The Bayh-Dole Act (1980) allowed universities and corporations to keep the rights to inventions and intellectual property that were discovered or created with the aid of federal research dollars (Slaughter, 1998). Harmonious with the tenets of neoliberalism and specifically the privatization and marketization of public goods, this act allowed publicly funded research to be privatized and sold for profit on the open market. The National Cooperative Research Act (1984) gave research and development projects undertaken by joint university-business ventures special anti-trust status, enabling public funds to be used for private research and development projects that would otherwise be violations of anti-trust laws (Slaughter, 1998). The deregulation of university-industry collaborations is a further manifestation of neoliberalism, and when coupled with the Bayh-Dole Act strongly encourages the university to enter directly into the market.

### *Governance and Decision Making*

As Gumport (1993) began to discuss in the early 1990s, a distinctive shift occurred regarding the rationales and motivations of institutional decision-making. She notes the conversion from a decision-making process allegedly focused on equity and the generation of knowledge to

decision-making structure that is explicitly concerned with competitiveness and efficiency. Ayers (2005) notes a similar change in the mission statements of and discourse about community colleges, from what were allegedly focused on the democratization of higher education to a current “recontextualization of the educational process by economic processes and their neoliberal ideological basis” (p. 545). While we must be critical of the romanticized depiction of the historic roles played by American colleges and universities depicted by Gumport and Ayers, the explicit admission and promulgation of a corporate structure is a substantial change from previous systems of governance. Additional challenges to meaningful shared governance and fair labor practices have stemmed from the increased focus on efficiency. To this end, institutions are increasingly using part-time and adjunct faculty members, graduate students, and post-doctoral positions to teach undergraduates (Aronowitz, 2000; Bousquet, 2008; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Members of these groups are not a part of faculty senates or professorial labor organizations and as such they are prevented from engaging in the structures that allow faculty input in institutional decision-making (Gumport, 2000; Kezar, Lester, & Anderson, 2006; Levin, 2006; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Changes in the name of efficiency are not limited to the academic labor market, as institutions are increasingly outsourcing their periphery (and sometimes core) functions, including dining services, bookstores, and even residential life, and in the process negatively affecting the motivations of staff and faculty (Currie & Newson, 1998). As these areas become privatized, their educational focus becomes secondary to profit generation and corporate success. The limited role students have in traditional shared governance settings is often restricted to these periphery functions (Bambenek & Sifton, 2003), and with their corporatization came the disappearance of the student voice from the governance of these areas. While we must be critical of the efficacy of shared governance systems and the power of faculty and students in the decision-making process, the fact that those who teach undergraduates and undergraduates themselves are being removed from even token participation in the process is a troubling change to the governance of higher education (Kezar, Lester, & Anderson, 2006).

Even though the corporate governance structure has been shown to be ineffective relative to its collegial counterpart (Currie, 1998; Eckel, 2000; Gumport, 1993), it has taken hold of higher education (Washburn, 2006). This is not surprising, as those who are making corporate board decisions are increasingly the same people making decisions in the educational boardroom.

Pusser, Slaughter, and Thomas (2006) chronicle a growing number of trustees/regents that come directly from the private sector and without knowledge of or experience (beyond being a student) in higher education. These individuals bring their corporate logic to the educational decisions they make, resulting in the current focus on efficiency, revenue generation, and other capitalistic goals. While the corporatization of the governance of education is as old as the system of education itself (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), the alignment of educational goals with corporate interests is strikingly explicit in the era of neoliberalism.

### *Faculty in Neoliberal Education*

During the reign of neoliberalism, faculty have witnessed substantial retrenchment and the simultaneous increase of part-time and adjunct labor (Aronowitz, 2000; Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Kezar, 2004; Slaughter, 1993, 1998; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). While Slaughter's work on this topic is dated, her analysis is quite helpful in describing the ways in which concerns of cost effectiveness as well as a focus on competition have led to an increased number of part-time and adjunct faculty. Her research shows how this retrenchment has disproportionately affected the humanities and fine arts, which is congruent with an economic rationality guiding the decision-making process, as these areas are unlikely to generate substantial revenue. Further, the increased focus on serving the market and the use of corporate logic in the decision-making process has led to a decrease in the faculty's influence over curricular decisions (Rhoades, 2006). The redefinition of educational issues as economic issues removes the need for those knowledgeable in education to be meaningful members of the decision-making process (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Combined with the increasing number of part-time and adjunct faculty who do not have input into the governance of the institution, these changes result in an aggregate decrease in faculty power.

Most scholarly work concerning neoliberalism and faculty focuses on research universities and the changing roles, priorities, and composition of the faculty at this type of institutions. However, faculty at every type of institution feel the impact of neoliberal ideology. Through a study comprised of 171 interviews of community college faculty, Levin (2006) exposes the decreased power of the faculty and their perceived loss of agency in institutional decision-making. The faculty his team interviewed indicated they had lost control of the direction of their

institutions, and their perception that the administration, private business, and the government was steering the institution towards corporate and market interests. Rhoades and Slaughter's (1997) discussion of research universities yields similar results, where faculty are increasingly focused on generating revenue and the institution is increasingly oriented to serving the market. The congruity of goals and priorities of faculty from such drastically different types of institutions is a striking example of the impact neoliberal ideology has had on American higher education.

The neoliberal university emphasizes the role of the faculty not as educators, researchers, or members of a larger community, but as entrepreneurs (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Such a redefinition of their institutional role is accomplished in part through the rewards structure of the university. Clark (1998) notes how there has been an increasing prevalence of financial rewards for faculty whose research generates revenue, for course materials and syllabi that are sold for use at for-profit institutions, and for research that is commodified and commercialized (Lee & Rhoads, 2004; Powers, 2003), while the definition of "service" as a part of the tenure process has expanded to include corporate consulting (Washburn, 2006). Faculty work, be it teaching or research, is no longer judged on its academic rigor or disciplinary or educational impact, but by an economic rationality whose primary criteria is the ability for the products of this work to generate revenue (Levin, 2006). We must be cautious to place the causes of these changes purely on the institution, as the faculty themselves must bear some of the burden through their acceptance of many of these entrepreneurial behaviors, just as we must recognize that there are countless faculty members who consciously choose to not engage in such profit driven actions. However, the general redefinition of faculty into entrepreneurs is widespread, and is consistent with neoliberal ideology as is the commodification, commercialization, and marketization of the fruits of faculty labor.

Just as with pre-neoliberal higher education, institutions of higher education in a neoliberal world aim to create the next generation of workers (Aronowitz, 2000; Giroux, 2005; Levidow, 2005). What is unique about the neoliberal institution's approach to this goal is the explicit manner in which it is undertaken. To this end, the curriculum is explicitly structured to meet the needs of capital, while desired student development and educational outcomes are defined by job training

and career development. Levin (2005) conducted a series of interviews and focus groups of faculty at seven community colleges and found a stronger emphasis on workplace training and skill development with a simultaneous decrease in the importance of liberal arts, and transfer curricula. Gumport (1993) and Slaughter (1993), using a variety of institutional data and reports as well as personal interviews, found a comparable vocationalization of the curriculum and distinctive shift in financial allocations away from humanities and fine arts to disciplines that better meet the needs of the market. Aronowitz (2000) chronicles a parallel shift in curricular focus from a liberal arts and democratic education to one that is focused on job training and instilling neoliberal values within the next generation of workers. In a number of ways, the hidden curriculum that was always focused on meeting the needs of capital is being voluntarily exposed and embraced.

Contemporaneous with the extreme vocationalization of the curriculum was a shift in the role of the professor within the classroom. What were once educators, who in theory had the potential to realize the emancipatory power of education, now should be neutral disseminators of ideological content (Apple, 2001a; Giroux, 1988). Many of those who do not voluntarily submit to the economic rationality used to govern the institution and the country are criticized for attempting to indoctrinate students with radical leftist ideas (Jacoby, 2005; Zucker, 2006). While there remain a number of outspoken critics of the current structure, the most insidious impact of these critiques is the silencing of non-tenured faculty who do not have the notoriety or job security to withstand such critiques, particularly when they are made publicly. The affront on critical education is epitomized by David Horowitz's (2004) Student Bill of Rights, which calls for immediate de-politicalization of the classroom and instead mandates a "neutral" education free from indoctrination and manipulation. When professors attempt to realize the emancipatory power of education and act against the conservative attacks, groups such as F.I.R.E. – The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education – swarm to their campus and litter their administration, news outlets, and campuses with attack ads and threats of lawsuits.

These attacks serve two purposes: First, they systematically silence dissent and critique in the classroom while reinforcing it as a space of sterile learning (Apple, 2004). Critique and dissent of the current structure, be it economic, cultural, racial, or gender, is "political" and those who

present these critiques are attempting to indoctrinate their students with their own personal radical beliefs (Apple, 2001a). Second, these attacks transform the highly political content already taught in the classroom into “neutral” information (Aronowitz, 2000). By attacking those who express a dissenting view as injecting personal opinion or politics into the classroom, the curriculum that was questioned inherently is assumed as natural and apolitical. Such critiques attempt to hide the fact that all education is inherently political, especially the neoliberal curriculum supported by the ultra-conservatives who lead these attacks (see Horowitz, 2007; Horowitz & Laskin, 2009). Faculty who dare to question the current economic system are accused of abusing their power and position in the classroom, while those who promulgate neoliberal ideas and support the neoliberal hegemony are righteous teachers of the neutral and natural content that will enable students to succeed in the “real world” (Zucker, 2006).

### *Students in a Neoliberal World*

One of the most documented changes to students within colleges and universities in the neoliberal world is their transformation from students to customers (Apple, 2004; Aronowitz, 2000; Giroux & Giroux, 2004; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). While students have always “purchased” their education to some extent, this economic exchange was secondary to their identity on campus as learners, an identity that is far different from that of traditional consumers (Winston, 1999). With the neoliberal commodification of education, the economic exchange between the student and the institution becomes the defining relationship between the two. Scholars, policymakers, and educational practitioners affirm this transformation through the ways in which they conceive of the relationship between the institution and the student as one between the service provider and the customer (Newson, 2004; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). It may be true that colleges and universities have always treated their students as customers, explicitly and directly calling them customers instead of students is a recent phenomenon. Even in the face of over thirty years of research demonstrating the fundamental ways in which students differ from traditional customers (i.e. Swagler, 1978; Winston, 1999) and research discussing the negative implications that arise when students identify with and are treated as customers (i.e. Newson, 2004; Wellen, 2005), colleges and universities continue to call, treat, and engage with their students primarily as customers (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Just as individuals in the neoliberal world are in constant competition with one another (Clarke, 2005), students in the neoliberal university become less like members of a community of learners and more like individuals focused on enhancing their human capital and who are solely responsible and accountable to themselves (Newson, 2004). This new focus leads to an increased attention on personal achievement at the expense of care and attention towards the learning and development of fellow students and general campus environment. Students' involvement and identity within the institution becomes increasingly defined by their consumer orientation. Newson explains,

Other than as customers, [students] have no basis for perceiving that they have an investment in the way the institution functions, either for themselves or for students collectively, nor that they share responsible for the way it functions. They are encouraged to think of themselves as 'receivers' of a service, not as co-creators of a teaching-learning community. (p. 230)

While Newson herself utilizes an economic rationality by equating the students' concern or interest in the institution and institutional decisions with an "investment," her analysis of the student-consumer portrays students in neoliberal institutions with a radically different identity than that of traditional conceptualizations of students in higher education.

Elizabeth Brule (2004) explores instances in which students use a consumerist framework to define their relationship with the institution and the faculty. As she notes, students increasingly view themselves as purchasers of a product and demand a certain level of satisfaction, most fundamentally of which is the marketability of their education, and challenge institutional and faculty practices based on a consumer identity. The pinnacle of this is a recent case in which a woman sued her college for the full cost of her tuition and fees because she was unable to find a job after she graduated (Kessler, 2009). While it is in many ways good that students are insisting on influencing their education, the benefits of their involvement are severely limited by the narrow approach as consumers who demand quality assurance and marketability (Newson, 2004). The consumerist approach has meaningful implications in their academic lives, as student-consumers are less focused on learning, challenging themselves and their beliefs, and exploring different areas of knowledge, and more interested in obtaining the credential that will

enable them to achieve the economic success they desire (Brule, 2004). This narrow focus has coincided with an increased prevalence of plagiarism and cheating (McCabe, Trevino, & Butterfield, 2001; Thompson, 2006), which is the embodiment of the student-consumer embracing competition at all costs and rejecting the importance and role of the student-learner.

Brule (2004) continues by discussing the ways in which this customer orientation has redefined the relationship between students and faculty. The syllabus is no longer a guiding document outlining a course that could and should be changed by the faculty (or students) to meet academic and pedagogical challenges that may arise throughout the semester. Instead, it is a contract that defines the exact materials, requirements, and expectations, both of the student and the faculty member, and just as the contract in the neoliberal world is sacred and must not be compromised for any reason (Turner, 2008), the syllabus should not be altered for any purpose. Courses become pre-packaged goods that the autonomous student chooses, and the student becomes the passive receiver of a service that is provided by the institution (Levidow, 2005). The customer approach to course selection is perfectly articulated by changes in the enrollment process at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where students were recently told “When registering for classes, your Enrollment Requests are now called your Shopping Cart...Pick out the classes you want, put them in your Shopping Cart, then complete your registration” (see <http://www.oit.umass.edu/spire/upgrade.html>). Students reinforce their customer identity as they bring the market idea that “the customer knows best” to their college experience, even though this is often not the case regarding higher education, (Levidow, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Winston, 1999) since the asymmetry of knowledge regarding the content and process of higher education often requires a different relationship between the faculty and the student than that of the traditional customer/service provider (Winston, 1999). Nevertheless, the customer orientation continues to shape the interactions between students and faculty.

The neoliberal focus on wealth and economic success can help understand a radical shift in students’ goals, motivations, and their purpose of going to college. Saunders (2007) uses Astin’s (1998) Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey results from 1966-1996 to highlight a number of powerful trends in the changing motivations and goals of college students. In particular, in 1966 developing a meaningful philosophy of life was incoming students’ most

important goal, with 80% of students indicating that it was “essential” or “very important.” In contrast, being well off financially was an essential or very important goal of only 45% of students, ranking sixth on the list. In 1996, these two virtually traded positions, with being well off financially (74%) the top goal and developing a meaningful philosophy of life the sixth (42%). The economic focus of contemporary students is supported through further findings, including a 71% agreement with the statement “the chief benefit of a college education is to increase one’s earning power,” up from 54% in 1969. In addition, almost three quarters of students now indicate they are attending college “to be able to make more money,” up from one-half in 1971. Astin (1998) notes that these changes and trends began in the 1970s and peaked in the late 1980s, which matches the timeframe of the beginning of neoliberalism and its most dominant period (O’Connor, 2002). Further, Astin’s research shows students to be increasingly competitive, have a declining interest in the liberal arts and teaching careers, and a decreasing support of governmental action as a means of combating social and economic issues, all of which can be seen as logical extension of neoliberal ideology (Saunders (2007).

Lastly, the financial structure of higher education in a neoliberal world, its tuition, fees, and system of financial aid, further reflects and promulgates the redefinition of students as consumers. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) discuss how this transformation began to occur as early as 1972, with a distinctive change in governmental funding of higher education from institutional-based to student-based aid. As this trend continued, it was coupled with a drastic change in financial assistance from grant aid to loan aid (Paulson & St. John, 2002). Such changes help create a situation in which students are expected to bear the financial burden of their education, and become increasingly viewed as the primary beneficiaries and purchasers of education (Levidow, 2005). The social benefits of education, which have been used as a rationale for continued financial support of higher education, are of little interest to the neoliberal regime who views education just as any other social program – one in which the individual receives the benefits and as such should bear the responsibility.

## **Conclusion**

This overview of neoliberal ideology, the tactics used to perpetuate it, and its impact on public higher education in the United States, aimed to provide a greater understanding of the changes to

the structure, governance, faculty, and students of American colleges and universities. Most people associated with higher education, particularly in the United States, have never heard of neoliberalism or have only a superficial understanding of it, making this accessible overview an important contribution to discussions concerning contemporary U.S. higher education.

Understanding the central dimensions of neoliberalism is essential if critical educators are to create successful strategies to combat the effects of neoliberalism on higher education.

Additionally, by examining the tactics and arguments proponents of neoliberalism use to perpetuate the structures, institutions, and policies that support the neoliberal regime, we are better positioned to act against and counter them.

As opposed to many scholarly articles and books, this paper argues that the neoliberal university is not a completely new or unique incarnation of American higher education, just as neoliberalism is not a completely new socio-economic ideology. Instead, the neoliberal university strengthens and extends some of the nefarious purposes of our colleges and universities while simultaneously limiting their ability to realize their critical and emancipatory potential. Much of this shift is due to the infiltration of economic rationality within higher education, which has resulted in the prioritization of revenue generation and efficiency, corporate governance replacing shared and collegial models of decision making, faculty acting like entrepreneurs, and students being treated and identifying themselves as customers while simultaneously changing their goals and motivations in ways that correspond to the central ideas of neoliberalism. While these goals, priorities, and identities existed within higher education prior to the rise of neoliberalism, they have never been as explicit or pronounced as they currently are.

This paper intended to provide a brief overview of the central concepts that create the foundation on which neoliberal ideology is built. Importantly, we must not attempt to reduce neoliberalism to these concepts or define it purely as an ideology, though they are essential to any comprehensive understanding of the neoliberal world and the current state of American higher education. We must be aware of and critically engage with the institutions, practices, behaviors, and beliefs that together create and promulgate neoliberalism. Critical scholars have documented the impacts of neoliberalism on higher education, though most literature on colleges

and universities still fails to connect changes in the dominant socio-economic policy to changes within colleges and universities. If we can provide more accessible entry points for those not as well versed in economics or critical theory to join these critical conversations, hopefully this will change.

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