

The Corporate University

University Inc. The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education. By Jennifer Washburn. Basic Books, 2005.

Reviewed by John K. Wilson

In *University Inc.*, journalist Jennifer Washburn takes a critical look at corporate influences on colleges and universities, and the “wholesale culture shift” in higher education caused by the profit motive.

One key example occurred in 1998, when Novartis (now part of Syngenta) gave Berkeley \$25 million over five years to fund research in the Department of Plant and Microbial Biology, along with the first right to negotiate licenses, and two out of five seats on the department’s research committee, which determines how money gets used. The six member committee monitoring the agreement included three Novartis representatives and two administrators who had negotiated it for Berkeley.(31)

Under pressure from critics, Berkeley agreed to allow an independent research team from Michigan State University to examine the results of the deal. Their 2004 report concluded that the alliance was “outside the mainstream for research contracts with industry.”(35)

One of the loudest opponents of the deal was Ignacio Chapela, an assistant professor of microbial ecology—even though Chapela had actually worked for Novartis before coming to Berkeley.(21) In 2001, Chapela published a study in *Nature* showing that DNA from genetically-modified corn was being found in native Mexican corn, despite a ban on GM plants. Chapela was roundly attacked by the scientists who worked for biotech companies, and *Nature* was pressured to run an editorial note retracting its support for the article. Although Chapela’s research was speculative in parts, his work was never disproven.

Chapela’s colleagues voted 32-1 in favor of tenure, and an ad hoc tenure committee of experts unanimously supported tenure. But the budget committee opposed tenure, although one genetics professor, Jasper Rine, turned out to have ties with the biotech industry. With the budget committee’s help, the Berkeley administration found it easy to deny Chapela and remove a thorn from its side.(38-39)

One tactic corporations have used to control research is to force scientists to sign confidentiality agreements. If the research shows a drug is effective, it will be widely publicized; if the research shows a drug is ineffective or dangerous, the company can quash it. Betty Dong, a research at the University of California at San Francisco, was hired by Boots Pharmaceutical to study their thyroid medication, Synthroid. Dong discovered in 1990 that generic drugs were just as effective as Synthroid. But because of litigation, it took nine years before the study finally appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. The company sold billions of dollars of drugs before the secret about the study was revealed.(45)

When Brown University medical professor David Kern tried to present research in 1996 linking a rare lung ailment with the workplace of a company called Microfibres, the company threatened to sue, citing an old confidentiality agreement. Brown University officials refused to allow Kern to discuss his research, and then immediately shut down Kern’s occupational health program. In 1997, Kern presented his research despite the threats against his; his teaching and research positions at Brown University were eliminated, although the Centers for Disease Control officially recognized the new disease Kern had identified. For Brown University and Memorial Hospital, there was nothing to gain from research putting a valued company in a negative light. Microfibres’ owner and two relative sat on the hospital’s board, and the company had helped to fund the hospital’s histology lab and hoped that Microfibres would donate even more.

Washburn also examines the history of academic freedom in America, including the professors fired for expressing dissenting views that offended the businessmen who served as trustees, such as the infamous cases of Edward Bemis at the University of Chicago in 1895 and Edward Ross at Stanford University in

1900. But direct corporate interference in academic freedom was fairly rare, as in 1924, when the AAUP reported how the Phelps-Dodge Corporation pressured the University of Arizona to fire an agriculture professor who had testified before the state legislature about the harm caused by copper smelting fumes.(73)

The Bayh-Dole Act reshaped American universities in the 1980s, creating a massive increase in patents granted to colleges (from 264 in 1979 to over 3,200 in 2001) and much greater use of universities as research labs for corporate America. Many safeguards for the legislation, including limits on exclusive licenses and a fee for government-funded research, were left out of the act. Universities in turn began to build expensive new labs, hoping to garner some of the research and patent money. The university, long home for basic scientific research, began a rapid pursuit of the quick buck.

Corporate influences also undermine the culture of sharing essential to scientific advances. In one study, scientists seeking to commercialize research were three times as likely to delay publication for more than three months, and more than twice as likely to refuse to share information with other academics.(124) When taxpayers paid University of Utah researchers \$4.6 million to discover a gene linked to breast cancer, the university patented it and gave exclusive rights for its use to a company started by a Utah professor. The company even threatened legal action against University of Pennsylvania genetics professor Haig Kazazian when he tried to use the gene in his research to help save lives.(3)

As Washburn points out, the leaders of the AAUP and the movement for academic freedom realized a century ago that faculty needed security, due process, and faculty control of academic issues. Today, this system is at risk due to overreliance on adjunct instructors, and academic freedom is at stake. As Washburn notes, “By dismantling this system, universities risk not only diminishing the quality of instruction but imperiling this ideal.”(307)

Washburn explains, “To the extent that universities view themselves first as drivers of economic development, and only second as educational institutions, their priorities will be skewed, and they will neglect their commitment to the life of the mind.”(338) Facing the carrot of corporate money and the stick of decreased state funding, American higher education is entering a new era where the warnings of *University Inc.* need to be followed.