The Crisis of Higher Education: Neoliberalism and the Privileging of “Innovation” in The Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

The authors of this paper maintain that challenging the frame of “innovation” as a privileged keyword for higher education is a fresh and useful intervention in the conversation about the neoliberalization of higher education in the United States. Since our home institution, Purdue, is being celebrated by US News for “innovation,” the focus on the concept enables us to offer a Purdue lens on the topic. The authors argue that three high profile developments that have taken place since 2013 under the leadership of Purdue President Mitch Daniels—the University Honors College, the Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts Program, and Purdue Global—may also be regarded as “ideological innovations.” Alongside the laudable aspects of each of these developments, we argue that each serves the administration’s plan to decrease faculty power, especially in the humanities, by promoting initiatives that, in each case, increase the precariatization of instructional labor at Purdue and that move curriculum design and the hiring of teaching staff away from traditional academic departments and toward a more centralized model of educational control under the direction of high-level university administrators in and outside the College of Liberal Arts.

“Purdue University is a top public research institution developing practical solutions to today’s toughest challenges. Ranked the No. 5 Most Innovative University in the United States by U.S. News & World Report, Purdue delivers world-changing research and out-of-this-world discovery. Committed to hands-on and online, real-world learning, Purdue offers a transformative education to all. Committed to affordability and accessibility, Purdue has frozen tuition and most fees at 2012–13 levels, enabling more students than ever to graduate debt-free. See how Purdue never stops in the persistent pursuit of the next giant leap at https://purdue.edu/”

Our contemporary religion of innovation has as one of its tenets the following belief: Rather than defeat your competition, make your competitors irrelevant. This

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is exactly what we see in higher education. College faculty were not defeated after great struggle, after a battle with a winner and a loser. College has simply become redefined, over and over, in ways that make faculty irrelevant. College teaching, as a profession, is being eliminated one small, undetected, definitional drop at a time.

(x)—Herb Childress in The Adjunct Underclass: How America’s Colleges Betrayed Their Faculty, Their Students, and Their Mission.

On Innovation

The theory of disruptive innovation was first coined by Harvard professor Clayton M. Christensen in his research on the disk-drive industry and later popularized in The Innovator’s Dilemma (Christensen, 1997, 5). The theory explains the phenomenon by which an innovation transforms an existing market or sector by introducing simplicity, convenience, accessibility, and affordability where complication and high cost are the status quo. Initially, a disruptive innovation is formed in a niche market that may appear unattractive or inconsequential to industry incumbents, but eventually the new product or idea completely redefines the industry. A classic example is the personal computer which transformed the multi-frame forerunners into a huge new market and ultimately eliminated the prior computer industry. And Christensen claimed that the principles of disruptive innovation are applicable to the social sector as well. While disruptive innovations are not breakthrough technologies that make good products better; they are innovations that make products and services more accessible and affordable, thereby making them available to a much larger population.

As the example from a Purdue University press release suggests, the term “innovation” has become a privileged idea and decontexted concept in higher education. While celebrated without question by many university presidents to rationalize radical changes in the delivery and content of education and research in higher education, it is argued here that the concept of “innovation” has been inadequately studied in terms of its historical meanings and consequences. As Benoît Godin argued in his study of the term, “This shift occurred in a matter of a few years, as part of the larger trend toward the ‘economization’ of science and technology” (Godin, 2017, 199).

To concretize, perhaps the most significant innovation in higher education discourse in the twenty-first century has been the dissemination of the acronym STEM as the paradigmatic term to frame the value of disciplinary and interdisciplinary pursuits which consciously excludes liberal arts and humanistic studies. As Carnegie Mellon’s Judith Hallinen reports, the now dominant term was developed in 2001: “STEM, in full science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, field and curriculum centered on education in the disciplines of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). The STEM acronym was introduced in 2001 by scientific administrators at the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF)” (Hallinen, 2020).

As Hallinen argues, STEM emerged as the key acronym that would drive US governmental level education discourse in response to a felt sense that the US was falling behind other countries in terms of economic competitiveness. The fact that US students scored poorly when compared to international peers in math and science testing led to a sense of crisis in US governmental educational circles. This led to consequential shifts in educational funding and priorities in the US at K-12 and higher educational levels.
In a *Washington Post* editorial on “Why we still need to study the humanities in a STEM world,” Gerald Greenberg, a linguist and administrator at Syracuse, writes in contradiction to the STEM focus:

When you take courses in any humanities discipline, you are using different methods to learn about individuals, yourself, and groups of peoples. You examine relationships and feelings, the feelings of others, as well as your own feelings. You develop empathy and an appreciation for others that can help address difficult situations, personal and professional. The ability to process information and to deal with difficult situations is important to everyone just to get through everyday life. It is also important for helping to deal with contemporary global issues at local, national, and international levels. Mathematics, the sciences, engineering, and technology are certainly useful, but the humanities provide another way of viewing issues, and better decisions are made when diverse opinions and ideas are considered. Leaders and decision-makers who are able to employ a broader, more diverse range of ideas and knowledge will be better able to run businesses and governments and react to difficult situations as they develop and arise. We see time and time again, however, that a lack of appreciation of the humanity involved in any situation can lead to undesirable results. (Greenberg, 2017)

In *You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a 'Useless' Liberal Arts Education*, George Anders echoes Greenberg’s perspective by explaining why “supposedly impractical classes [in the liberal arts] can turn into superb launching pads for ambitious students’ careers” (Anders, 2019, 22). Anders writes that “We as a country were in danger of marginalizing some of our most valuable talent. We needed freethinking pioneers more than ever, yet in many sectors we were mocking the very people that we should have been celebrating” (Anders 2019, 23). Citing comments by Republican Florida politicians Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio that mock the value of humanistic studies, Anders notes that “Taunting liberal arts majors had become an ugly sport” (Anders, 2019, 23).

Paradoxically, the term STEM could also be reconfigured to be interpreted as a noun in the botanical context of one plant part that supports another. The botanical context for the term dovetails with how twentieth century cultural critics such as Lewis Mumford, Paul Goodman, and Robert Paul Wolff understood knowledge through an organic conception of reality. Using the human body as a metaphor, Mumford, for example, imagined an inextricable connection between science (and what Mumford called “Technics”) and history, society, and human relations. The Puritan metaphor of the head and the heart is relevant here as both intellect and passion (and one might add the stomach to reflect economics). Taken together, these metaphorical parts of the human body constitute the whole of what it means to be human. Privileging one part of the human body, or one part of human knowledge to the exclusion of the other parts is to mystify and limit the meanings of human experience. In addition, as Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci reminded us, there is a connection between practical human activity and thought. The organicist conception of knowledge, therefore, links all bodies of knowledge, the practical as well as the theoretical. As Mumford put it:

Of [life’s] vast transformations, only an infinitesimal part is visible or can be reduced to any mathematical order… that plenitude of life which even the humblest being in some degree exhibits… cannot be resolved in any mathematical equation or converted into a geometric metaphor without eliminating a large part of the relevant experience. (Mumford, 1970, 54).

A Mumfordian or organicist redefinition of the term “STEM” in the space of higher education would enable us to notice intersections between liberal arts fields of inquiry...
that tend to be cordoned off from one another when STEM is understood as an ideological power term that implies only the hard sciences.

Like “STEM,” the term “innovation” itself is unusually unstable in its connotations, and even contradictory in its historical usages. The definition of innovation that connotes “inward change” dovetails with our sense of the value of humanistic studies as an educational opportunity to encourage internal transformation in students through critical thinking, dialogic debate, and exposure to texts and ideas that challenge how students imagined the world prior to entering their classroom experience. But, the term currently connotes marketing products, not the development of young minds. The contemporary interpretation of “innovation” in the higher education sphere, influenced as it is by definitions of the term found in corporate, technical, and entrepreneurial contexts, suggests a contradiction between the new, which is imagined as an unquestioned positive development, and the old, which is regarded as something that is moribund and thus unworthy of respect: thus, its usage in higher education.

Ideological Innovations: Neoliberalism and Culture Wars under Mitch Daniels at Purdue

Evaluating higher education through the lens of a term that signifies a rejection of contemplation is only one troubling feature and ironic outcome to the treatment of innovation as a source of celebration on the Purdue website because the university received a high ranking in the category in the *U.S. News and World Report* (Of course, the intensification of the college rankings system in recent years is itself a market-driven innovation in the evaluation of quality in higher education that many commentators have argued is not an innovation worth celebrating!). Since 2013 under the administration of former Republican Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels, innovation at Purdue has shaped the university through a two-pronged approach.

On one hand, innovation has been inextricably connected to the neoliberal stage of capitalism. For nearly a century, the US economy, and most other wealthy capitalist economies, have shifted their priorities to making money via financial speculation. Government has helped the process by adopting free market, market fundamentalist, and neoliberal economic policies. Introduced selectively during the presidency of Jimmy Carter and promoted in a full-blown manner in the Reagan era, US economic policy has been driven by the downsizing of government (except the military), deregulation, and privatization of as many formerly public institutions as possible. Most Democrats and Republicans have been fighting over how to cut government spending and which people-oriented programs to eliminate. They are not fighting about whether to cut government, but rather in what ways it should be cut. This policy program has often been referred to as “market fundamentalism.” In 2021, this policy program has been mitigated by the economic crisis brought on by the COVID pandemic.

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1 Neoliberalism is an often-used concept in modern social and economic theory. For some, it reflects a set of public policies designed to limit government spending, particularly endorsing programs of austerity. The theoretical underpinnings of neoliberal policy is the idea that government is an impediment to societal wellbeing; that markets rather than government programs stimulate development. For President Reagan “government was not the solution, government was the problem.” Other theorists have argued that neoliberalism represents the latest phase of capitalism, nationally and globally. In this stage, financial institutions and speculation, rather than industrial production are driving economic life. Whether a policy or a stage, the fundamental idea of neoliberalism is the downsizing of aspects of government-supported institutions and programs for citizens. Privatization of public institutions and programs is a central feature of neoliberalism.
Following the trends sketched out above, at Purdue the private sector has gained increasing access to land, buildings, and service contracts at Indiana’s Land Grant Public University. On the other hand, “innovation” has had a decidedly backward-leaning dimension. It connotes a return to a 1980s-style “culture war” ideological attack on humanistic studies at Purdue. In separate Washington Post editorials, Purdue President Mitchell E. Daniels Jr. and Purdue Liberal Arts Dean David Reingold, slammed contemporary practices in the liberal arts at Purdue and elsewhere. They ignored policy changes that reversed the long-standing growth in liberal arts enrollments: changing course requirements in colleges outside of the liberal arts, shifting the percentage of the overall makeup of incoming first year classes away from liberal arts admissions and toward ramping up the numbers of students in other colleges, and the removal of three popular liberal arts departments (kinesiology, psychology, and audiology) from the College of Liberal Arts. Rather than considering broader policy and curricular changes in the university, Liberal Arts Dean Reingold blamed Liberal Arts faculty for failing to excite and to inspire Purdue students to want to take their courses:

Together, academics and administrators have championed a soft and directionless core curriculum, one that fails to challenge or inspire students. Often the result is students who complete their general education requirements with little engagement and seldom stray from their major area of study. We have lost sight of the fact that our courses may be stale, overly dogmatic and uninteresting to students, accepting our role as an often unwanted requirement on the path to a diploma. The result of these unforced errors is that, for many, the liberal arts no longer are an integral part of what constitutes a college education. They are easily replaced. A three-week overseas study class has become acceptable to fulfill the sole humanities component of a plan of study. (Reingold, 2018)

Like Dean Reingold, President Daniels claims Liberal Arts faculty engage in group think and lack diversity, offering a “monotonously one-sided view of the world” to the point that English departments and sociologists “want to render themselves irrelevant” (Daniels, 2018). Daniels asserts that liberal arts as currently taught are “boring,” that liberal arts scholarship is “shoddy” and that Liberal Arts faculty think in a way that is so “monolithic” and conformist and that Liberal Arts faculty do not really need tenure because Liberal Arts faculty think alike anyway and therefore do not need academic protection for freedom of thought (Daniels, October 12, 2018).

Mitch Daniels frequently engages in a public “culture wars” style condemnation of how the humanities are taught at Purdue and other universities. He has mocked contemporary humanities researchers for their innovative approaches to their fields. In such cases, Daniels, allegedly the innovator, a term that Godin remarks has since the late eighteenth century been paired with the term “revolution,” calls for a conservative, even reactionary, return to older narratives of historiography and canonicity.

For example, in a Washington Post opinion piece about World War One commemoration and using the concept of “presentism” as a straw man, Daniels scolds professional historians who challenge the American Exceptionalist narrative of the nation’s persistent ascent toward a more perfect union: “It [presentism] finds further expression in the sneering denigration of America’s history and, it seems, almost all those who made it. A better reading is that the story line of America, with all its imperfections past and continuing, is about the steady expansion of human freedom and unprecedented, widespread material prosperity” (Daniels, April 26, 2018).
Daniels’ old-fashioned account of American history as a “steady expansion of human freedom” creates the false assumption that the “story line” of America’s progressive tendencies is inevitable and always moving in a line of ascent toward expanded economic, civic, and human rights. No struggle. No resistance. No potentially permanent backsliding on hard won victories in environmental protections, labor rights, human rights, voting rights, rights for women, African Americans, queer communities, and indigenous peoples. Daniels’ narrative is dangerous because it simply flies in the face of the historical record, historical scholarship, and indeed, innovation.

In the remarks he made in his Washington Post editorial, Daniels chastises contemporary historians for “presentism,” and for a “sneering denigration of America’s history.” In terms of the appropriation of the history of the term “innovation” into the space of higher education at Purdue, Daniels is what Godin refers to as an “innovating ideologist” (Godin, 2015, 145). By regarding Daniels as an “innovating ideologist,” we mean to say that his emphasis is not only about changes to the physical plant of the West Lafayette campus, but also supporting privately owned apartments and a private subdivision housing development on Purdue land, and of the accelerated support for Purdue’s corporate partnerships in the Discovery Park and Purdue Research Park.

The focus here is on Daniels as an “innovator” in the values and beliefs realm of image management and idea formation. Godin remarks: “As innovating ideologists, social actors try to legitimate their contested behavior with words. They present their behavior as legitimate, using favorable terms: coining new terms, altering the meaning of existing terms, and, briefly stated, placing their action in a new moral light” (Godin, 2015, 145). In terms of “innovating ideologist,” Daniels has been the most outspoken critic of humanities scholarship and education at Purdue since the development of the College of the Liberal Arts (then known as the School of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education) in the 1960s. He has persistently advocated for a return in literary studies to a Great Books curriculum and he has been a strong and vocal critic of contemporary humanities research and instruction:

In the university context, the “liberal” arts have in many places become centers of the most illiberal viewpoints. Speech codes, forbidden words, compulsory “thought crime” reeducation, and other repressive policies have replaced the lively clash of ideas. Conformity of thought, enforced by heavy-handed peer pressure and reinforced by generations of self-perpetuating personnel practices, has by now achieved comic-tragic proportions. (Daniels, October 12, 2018)

The paradoxically atavistic innovation of a twenty-first century version of a 1980s-style “culture war” at Purdue has shaken morale among Liberal Arts faculty and put the humanities faculty on the defensive while providing the cover for neoliberal polices that include the radical shift in the humanities at Purdue away from tenure line appointments, a shift so severe that the Department of English has, for example, not been authorized to hire in literary or cultural studies on the tenure track since 2008. One sign that Purdue faculty are fed up with the deterioration of their status in the eyes of Purdue administration is that AAUP (American Association of University Professors) membership at the West Lafayette campus has grown during the Daniels era to the point that the once small chapter has by some margin now become the largest in the state of Indiana. At the same time, only a very small fraction of Purdue’s teaching corps belongs to AAUP while the shift from tenured to precariat teaching labor marches on, especially in the humanities, contributing to the dismantling of faculty governance as a counterweight to administrative control in policy and curriculum.
Three Purdue Innovations in Undergraduate Pedagogy: The Honors College, Purdue Global, and Cornerstone

Purdue has been dismantling the tenure system (and the quality of education) in the humanities at Purdue University through a series of “innovations” that appear on the surface to be creative and progressive. The development of the university-wide Honors College is one example of a laudable-sounding “innovation” developed in recent years. However, alongside the Honor College’s admirable qualities, it has served as one of several new avenues for Purdue to replace tenure track faculty with precariat instructional labor, as well as to diminish the role of faculty control over curriculum, policy, and hiring in and through traditional departmental units in the humanities such as English and History. The definition of the new Honors College as it appears in the strategic plan for 2017–2022 on the official Purdue website seems attractive:

The Honors College champions the cultivation of knowledge and skills by bringing together high ability students from all areas of study into one intellectual and residential community of scholars. This interdisciplinary approach is predicated upon the participation of all Purdue’s colleges, through multiple academic disciplines and their faculty and staff. Collaboration of all members of the Purdue community is paramount to helping the Honors College reach its vision: Achieve Preeminence in Honors Education as a National Exemplar.

We acknowledge the value of an elite-style small liberal arts college environment to take the edge off Purdue’s massive scale and to encourage some of the state’s “best and brightest” to choose to matriculate at Purdue. And yet, other than a handful of Deans in the new college (two are tenured faculty in the English department), who, primarily, now serve an administrative function in the college, and thus are removed from the doings of their home department in the College of Liberal Arts, the core teaching faculty in the college consists of twelve non-tenure line “clinical,” “visiting,” or postdoctoral instructors.

Most certainly, the innovation of the “clinical” term as a positional rank in the humanities has been notable in recent years. On one hand, the assignment of some non-tenure line teachers as “clinical assistant professors” or “professors of the practice” is a commendable effort put forward by institutions such as Purdue to award some version of professorial status to hard working and accomplished academicians who are forced to work off the tenure track because of the collapse of the academic job market in the humanities. At the same time, the innovation of the “clinical” terminology serves as a smoke screen that enables Purdue and other institutions to present to the public the false image that permanent faculty are performing the bulk of undergraduate instruction. In fact, seventy percent of liberal arts instruction at Purdue is currently undertaken by non-tenure line staffing.

The concern with the “clinical” adjective is that, when coupled with the “professor” term, it signifies scientific rigor alongside a term associated with the traditional privileges afforded to full-time instructors in higher education when, in fact, the “clinical” term erases job security and academic freedom for the “clinical professor.” Connoting estimable qualities such as direct patient therapeutic care, strict detachment in analysis, and rigorous research standards through “clinical trials,” the term “clinical,” when applied in the humanities context, denotes loss of job security, competitive salaries, the reduction of the number of faculty in the humanities offered academic freedom protections, a diminishment of secure faculty to serve as a counterweight to administrative power, and reduced faculty control over curriculum and policy. The Honors College example illustrates how Purdue
under President Daniels has propagated the image of quality enhancement through innovation while draining humanities’ departments of new faculty hires and shifting what hiring there is in the humanities at Purdue from tenure lines in the College of Liberal Arts to precariat labor that is administered by Deans outside the traditional departmental structure.

The examples of two other major innovations established during the Daniels administration—the Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts program for first year students and Purdue Global—speak to how Purdue has created laudable pedagogical initiatives but carried them out in ways that drain tenure lines and a focus on academic specialization in the liberal arts in the context of a populist agenda. From one point of view, Cornerstone and Purdue Global convey to the public how Indiana’s flagship Land Grant university is making good on the promise of bringing the university’s renowned faculty expertise and vaunted reputation to constituencies that would otherwise lack contact with instructors affiliated with a Carnegie Endowment R-1 level research university.

As with the Honors College example, who could argue against the idea of Purdue Global as a way to reach military veterans, working mothers, and underprivileged Hoosiers who lack the time and economic resources to attend a brick-and-mortar campus to receive a first-rate Purdue education? And yet, Purdue Global teaching faculty exist in an even more precarious situation than the Honors College clinical faculty on the West Lafayette campus. Purdue Global faculty do not control their methods of course delivery or course content. None are tenured. Purdue Global does not have a College of Liberal Arts, so there is no way to make exact comparisons between the number of tenure line faculty in liberal arts disciplines at Purdue Global and the comparable situation at the West Lafayette campus.

A peak into the website for Purdue Global’s College of Social and Behavioral Science can, however, provide one window into the extraordinarily tenuous status of instructors at the online institution known until 2018 as Kaplan University. The website for the college shows that there are, in total, two faculty members who are listed as “full time adjuncts,” the most secure rank available for instructors in the college. Both adjunct instructors are featured on the website with photographs and biographies. To find out who else is teaching in the college, one needs to pivot to another link entitled “College of Social and Behavioral Science Faculty Roster.” By our count, the faculty roster includes 525 separate names. These faculty do not merit the photograph and the mini-biography afforded to the two “full time adjuncts.” There is a name, a terminal degree, and that is it. It goes without saying that these 525 members on the faculty roster lack the rights, protections, or input into curriculum, faculty governance, text adaptation, and teaching methods that tenure line faculty enjoy on a traditional campus.

The Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts Program is a case of pedagogical innovation at Purdue that lies somewhere between the elite qualities associated with the Honors College and the populist outreach dimension of Purdue Global. As with the Honors College, we are not alone in appreciating the idea that permanent humanities faculty should engage closely with first year students in units outside of the Liberal Arts college. In February 2020, the Teagle Foundation joined with the National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH), to award Purdue Cornerstone a major grant to support the development of comparable programs at other colleges and universities. During a February 2020 webinar, Andrew Del-Banco, a Columbia humanities professor and director of the Teagle Foundation, explained

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2 In “There’s a Reason the Purdue-Kaplan Deal Sounds Too Good to be True,” Robert Shireman describes some of the history of Kaplan University, for-profit online universities in general, and some of the early criticisms of the Purdue Global purchase of Kaplan.
why Purdue Cornerstone deserves foundation support as a model for what the website describes as “what can be done—as students move into STEM, business, health, and other pre-professional fields—to ensure that college students, whatever their major or background, encounter inspiring works of literature and philosophy and grasp the power of liberal learning and its relevance to their professional aspirations”:

[Introductory] courses should be the place where students discover the joy of learning and test themselves in an atmosphere of confidence under the direction of a teacher who wants to support them… all students deserve the opportunity for self-discovery under the guidance of a sympathetic and experienced faculty member. In other words, that introductory courses should not be consigned to fledgling teachers as good as many of them can be, but the responsibility for introductory courses should be taken by the faculty itself (emphasis ours). (DelBanco, 2020)

The Teagle Foundation and the NEH have supported Cornerstone with a major grant because there is undeniable merit in bringing great books, challenging ideas, and the mentorship of seasoned faculty with field expertise to the undergraduate masses as one way to acknowledge the relevance of the liberal arts at a campus that has been increasingly defined by Purdue administrators as STEM-centric. As defined on its Purdue website:

Cornerstone is designed to provide all students with the opportunity to broaden their understanding of the world and themselves, while strengthening the skills to read closely, write clearly, speak with confidence, and to engage with differing viewpoints and perspectives through general education courses. The initiative emphasizes gateway courses aimed at incoming students and is anchored in transformative texts—the greatest that has been thought, said, and written across human history.

Given that one of the authors of this article has taught seven sections in Cornerstone over the last three years, we can attest to the worthy aspects of the new program’s pedagogical mission. Without question, faculty experience pleasure in offering first year students in fields ranging from construction management to aerospace engineering an increasingly rare opportunity to take a deep dive into a humanities style classroom that is dialogic and as much about asking questions as about finding answers. At the same time, we remain painfully aware that Cornerstone functions at Purdue to degrade departmental power in the humanities and to carry on a regressive “culture war” against progressive innovations in humanities scholarship. It dismantles the more than half a century of advanced studies in the humanities at Purdue by repudiating the model of hiring faculty in specializations that draw graduate students to study with them. As with the Honors College, it relies upon precariat labor to carry out the majority of program instruction. Columbia’s DelBanco praises Purdue Cornerstone for understanding that “responsibility for introductory courses should be taken by the faculty itself” (Delbanco, 2020).

One key point here is that Purdue has stretched conventional and commonly understood definitions of the meaning of “faculty” to the point that the majority of Cornerstone teaching, while not performed by graduate instructors (presumably the “fledgling teachers” to which Delbanco refers), is performed, not by tenure or tenure line faculty at Purdue, but rather by “clinical,” “adjunct,” “teaching professor,” “professor of practice,” and “visiting” faculty, post doctorate non-tenure line instructors, as well as an assortment of non-tenure line staff members at Purdue including a “senior research associate” and a special assistant to the Dean.

To offer one concrete example of how Cornerstone currently stretches the definition of “faculty” instruction to the point that the term no longer connotes a tenure or tenure line
position, we can look at the staffing for Cornerstone 102 for the Fall 2020 semester. Purdue offered 29 sections of the 102 course in Fall 2020. Nine sections were taught by tenure or tenure line faculty. Twenty sections were offered by non-tenure instructors including faculty who held titles such as “professor of practice,” “senior research associate,” “lecturer,” and “teaching professor.” One problem with the emphasis on non-tenure line faculty in Cornerstone is that while the program is designed to offer first year students the chance to receive close attention and mentoring from faculty, the reality is that the teaching loads for non-tenure line instructors who do the bulk of Cornerstone instruction are such that it is difficult to imagine that such close mentoring is possible. Two of the “teaching professors,” for example, offer four sections each of Cornerstone 102 for the Fall 2021. Given that each section holds 30 students, these two faculty would be responsible for mentoring 240 students in one semester.

In The Adjunct Underclass: How America’s Colleges Betrayed Their Faculty, Their Students, and Their Mission, Herb Childress argues that the shift of faculty teaching responsibilities from upper division courses to so-called service, breadth, or general education courses is one reason why currently tenured faculty who labor in the humanities can become vulnerable to replacement by contingency labor, and also why compensation for contingency labor can be treated as a fungible commodity that “places downward pressure on price” (Childress, 2019, 77). Childress notes the lower-division courses, which, even at research universities “will likely be taught by contingent faculty, whether adjuncts, graduate student teaching assistants, or postdocs” (Childress, 2019, 79), can be “treated as commodities, one product being the same as any other, produced and consumed in every landscape, teachable by faculty with less specialization and expertise” (Childress, 2019, 78).

Childress’ goal is not to disparage the value of introductory courses or to degrade the dedicated work teachers perform in the lower-division courses. He draws on his own experience of teaching undergraduates at the rank of postdoctoral fellow until the age of 48. Rather, his point is that because the introductory course tends to be more fungible than the area specific course, there is “the relative ease of finding adjuncts for lower-level courses” (Childress, 2019, 78) and “the greatest number of non-affiliated people who are competent enough to teach them” (Childress, 2019, 78), which leads, Childress argues, to academia’s version of “commodity pricing” of academic instruction (Childress, 2019, 76).

Intro to Sociology and milk are uniform and impersonal products, drawn as needed from their respective common tanks. They are fungible: non-differentiated and mutually exchangeable. The fungibility of the commodity places downward pressure on price, and cannot consider the unique practices of the producer…. In the eyes of the college-as-aggregator, as long as any specific provider is above the floor of competency, it doesn’t really matter if they’re any better (Childress, 2019, 77).

By limiting tenure track hiring in the humanities at Purdue—again, no tenure lines for literary studies in English in thirteen years and counting—and simultaneously developing a non-departmentally administered major new first year liberal arts program, Cornerstone at Purdue is claiming to be “saving” the humanities at a STEM school. However, Cornerstone has been staffed with a strong majority non-tenure line teaching staff and moving what tenure line faculty members still exist into lower-level teaching assignments that, as Childress argues, makes faculty tend to be far more replaceable, subject to contingency, and less expensive to staff than the upper division courses that had for at least a half century been the primary teaching responsibility for tenure and tenure track faculty at Purdue.

Purdue leadership has been selective when defining which aspects of innovation to support and which to degrade. During the COVID crisis, for example, Purdue
administrators have forcefully encouraged faculty to return to “traditional” modes of instruction—face to face, in person, classroom instruction—over the more “innovative” strategy of using computer resources such as Zoom to facilitate safe teaching at a distance during the pandemic. In his “Open Letter to the People of Purdue” from January 4, 2021, for example, Daniels offered his impressions of how things went on the West Lafayette campus during the Fall Semester, dominated as it was by the pandemic: “The obvious starting point is that our work was far from perfect. Teaching which, for the protection of faculty, was delivered substantially online was by definition sub-optimal” (Daniels, January 4, 2021). In public commentaries on approaches to history and literature, Daniels, as noted above, has consistently condemned innovative thinking in the humanities.

In an analysis of Godin’s history of the term, Emma Green points out in an *Atlantic* magazine article that it was only in 1939 that the term “innovation” began to replace “invention” as a key designation for technological change: “Godin attributes this differentiation to a 1939 definition offered by Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter. He defined invention as an act of intellectual creativity undertaken without any thought given to its possible economic import, while innovation happens when firms figure out how to craft inventions into constructive changes in their business model” (Green, 2013). Following the analyses of Godin and Green, we question the current emphasis in higher education discourse on constructive change as a form of innovation. We do so because the shift to an “innovation” paradigm moves higher education evaluation away from a term-invention associated with disinterested “intellectual creativity” to another term—innovation—that focuses on how to incorporate inventions into a “business model,” or as discussed in political economy, “neoliberalism.”

We believe the absorption of “innovation” into a prominent place in higher education discourse is itself a fundamental ideological innovation that should be historicized and viewed, as it is by Godin, as a “contested concept” (Godin, 2015, 5). It is true that, as Godin notes, “innovation” was a political and politicized term in the Feudal era when it was regarded with suspicion as heretical and deviant, as a challenge to authority—it was a term “regulated by Kings, forbidden by law and punished—although Kings constantly innovate.” It is equally the case today, when innovation is cherished, rather than feared, that “innovation has a definite relation to politics too, as an instrument of industrial policy” (Godin, 2015, 5). Why a term associated, pejoratively, in Feudal arrangements, and, in celebratory terms, in modernist capitalism, has become a keyword in higher education, is something to ponder, to de-naturalize.

As noted above in comments on Great Books authors ranging from Aristotle to Burke, “innovation” has been far from a term of privilege throughout the long history of Western culture and ideas. It may be worthwhile to note that the term “innovation” is, even today, regularly regarded by experts in the technology and entrepreneurial and corporate spaces as a nebulous buzzword. “Innovation” lacks clear meaning or agreed upon definition, even by individuals associated with the business sector, where one would expect the term to be well-understood, defined, and promoted as an essential dimension of corporate practice in a growth model.3 Given the ubiquitous significance and fuzzy quality of the term—even

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3 As Nick Skillcorn writes in “What is innovation? 15 experts share their innovation definition”: Innovation is truly a confusing buzzword which many people love to hate. Every business leader agrees that it is important. But nobody can quite seem to agree on what it actually is or what it means. If you ask Google for an innovation definition, it is less than helpful, coming up with over 300 million results with thousands of definitions. Its own definition is pretty much useless: “the action or process of innovating”. Using the traditional sources for a definition such as the Oxford dictionary also doesn’t help much, with
among business experts who disagree about its meaning—we question whether “innovation” should be regarded as a valued term in public higher education.

Of course, public universities are dynamic, even dialectical, spaces that unquestionably demonstrate a history over the long term of major changes in terms of educational, research, and outreach missions. Such changes, historians of American academia such as Jim Berlin and Clyde Barrow argue, can be mapped out according to changing relations between workers and owners and changing understandings of how the ruling class imagined the way citizens and laborers needed to be trained in different economic and social environments. This essay is less about the reality that institutions inevitably change and adapt to new challenges and new social, political, economic situations, and the fact that universities themselves are constantly engaged in questioning paradigms and adding to our understanding of the world and the role of human beings in it. This essay is more about whose voices are heard when institutions make changes and what are the goals of change and how are changes implemented?

Why, at Purdue at least, where the authors of this essay have, collectively, taught for close to 75 years, has the on the ground experience of ‘innovation’ too often felt like a zero-sum game of winners and losers, with rules, policies, mandates, and publicity virtually always coming from the top down, rather than from the bottom up? Why are so many “innovations”—Purdue’s in the end unsuccessful bid in 2018 to partner with the Bechtel Corporation to run the Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory to the acquisition and the rebranding of Kaplan University’s online education platform as Purdue Global immediately come to mind—been put forward with little transparency and genuine discussion and debate among faculty as to the efficacy of “innovation” as a value that the majority of the faculty perceives as a public good?

In sum, calls for innovation in the context of economic shocks has increased the shift in higher education from teaching by tenured faculty to graduate students and adjunct faculty who are hired for short periods of time with the possibility of contract renewals. As Childress argues, faculty increasingly see themselves as part of a new working class, a sector which experiences job and income insecurity as do other precariat workers in the society.

In “Going Public: Political Discourse and the Faculty Voice,” Linda Ray Pratt, an English professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and, at the time she wrote the essay in the 1990s, president of the AAUP, narrates “Three Case Studies” in which university faculty engaged in lobbying and public relations activities to support educational initiatives in Nebraska and Connecticut. Pratt writes:

The idea that education’s role is to deliver performative skills at efficient costs is a public consensus which most practitioners of the profession do not accept. Yet the
traditional academic consensus is as broken internally as it is externally. Our problem is how to be sufficiently united to find a coherent alternative to it. Our best hope for a coherent internal strategy is in unifying around those few standards that are critical to almost all of us. (Pratt, 1995)

Pratt elaborates on what “most of us believe”: valuing academic freedom; a diverse curriculum; fluid evaluation of student performance, and not just metrics. In a world of alleged economic scarcities, Pratt claims, publics do not understand these values. Therefore, she advocates exposing the contradictions in a confused public attitude that both demands quality in education for its investment and wants to believe that one college credit is as good as any other. “Clearly it means organizing to address local situations, lobby legislatures, build coalitions with students, parents, and alumni, and utilize the structure of faculty governance to speak effectively within our systems” (Pratt, 1995, 50).

At base, Pratt argues that it is a mistake to defend education using a business model: competition between and within units, marketing products, measuring the utility of programs by using superficial metrics, and presenting all preexisting curricula as archaic and inappropriate to the innovative needs of the twenty-first century.

When the business model is appropriated by academe to defend itself, the public university becomes subject to the other standards applicable to business work load efficiency, downsizing in personnel, elimination of program duplication, teaching more students with fewer faculty, replacing inefficient classroom contact with high-tech ‘distance learning’ through television. (Pratt, 1995, 39)

Initiated by the decline in public spending for higher education beginning in the 1980s, the recession of 2008 and beyond, and a series of structural changes and administrative decisions instituted over the last decade in public universities, such as the innovations we have discussed at Purdue in this essay, it has become more difficult to “unite” as a faculty into an organized coalition to educate the public, as Pratt calls for, and to pressure university administrations and trustees to back away from the many policies that shift universities from being a public asset into a private good. The shock of the COVID pandemic did not create, but magnified, these issues. Pratt was writing in the 1990s, but her concerns about neoliberal paradigms and the challenges to mobilizing faculty to engage in public demonstrations to push back against corporatist headwinds ring true today as well, even to a “research one” Big Ten land grant university such as Purdue that has skewed, over the last decade, into private hands.

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