Getting the General Idea: Managing the University's Uses

Randy Martin

And just what are the uses of the university? The question has quite a pedigree. Former University of California President Clark Kerr's book of that title (minus the question) is now in its fourth edition. Kerr is credited with grasping the essence of the modern American research university, or, as he termed it, "multiversity," as a novel conglomerate community. "As a new type of institution, it is not really private and it is not really public; it is neither entirely of the world, nor entirely apart from it" (2). Kerr was famously situating the university not just institutionally but polemically between two historical models. In the mid-nineteenth century, John Henry Cardinal Newman, who had founded the University of Dublin, urged a philosophically guided liberal arts as knowledge for its own ends with the university walls a protector against the desacralizing instrumentality of higher learning. Early in the twentieth century, Abraham Flexner, who had recruited Einstein to the US and championed reform of medical education, located the scientifically grounded university inside the "general social fabric of a given era" (Kerr, 4).

A good cold war pluralist, Kerr wanted both these missions and more. He had no trouble with the University as a vast employer and prodigious producer (in the first edition of *Uses* published in 1963, he boasted that the University of California had the highest output of laboratory mice in the world [Kerr, 8]). He had a bit more trouble with the notion that between employment and output lies labor. Nearly twenty years on, the corridors of higher learning would be encouraged to spew forth products for exchange and not merely for internal consumption. As education sociologists Sheila Slaughter and Larry Leslie have shown, the Bayh Dole Act of 1981 would encourage researchers to see gold in them thar mice, as the university was invited to follow the yellow brick road of patent lust (Slaughter and Leslie). And yet, while special places of employment would be held at the most elite institutions for the purposes

of such enrichment, in the four decades since Kerr's first edition there has been a massive popularization and industrialization of higher education.

Today, commodification of what higher education makes, and industrialization of what it does, are more potent forces than the conflicting pulls of philosophy and science. Yet the fate of the university's ruling ideas still needs to be established. While the traffic in new knowledge as product garners great public attention, the industrial weave of higher ed into the social fabric is far more extensive than anything Flexner could have imagined. On both counts, post-secondary education is a highly concentrated business. At the dawn of the new millennium there were 125 research universities charged with knowledge (and capital) production, and just over four thousand institutions with a lesser designation consigned merely to educating students, that remain largely outside this loop. Forty percent of these colleges enroll fewer than 1,000 students, and together teach only four percent of the total. A tenth of the institutions, largely public, take in 10,000 or more students for over half the total US enrollment. These four hundred or so schools are not simply mills for diplomas, but for teaching as well, the latter constituting a kind of closed circuit whereby the university replenishes its ranks. Over a million-and-a-quarter bachelor's degrees are conferred annually—roughly forty percent in three fields—business (258,000), social science (127,000), and education (108,000).

The milling of teachers is typically achieved by pursuit of the PhD. An education management organization claims to be able to run learning by the numbers. A critique of such claims would need to tread, albeit with some trepidation, on this calculating terrain. Interestingly, the numbers don't exactly line up. The largest numbers of doctorates are awarded per year (all data are for the 1999-2000 academic year) in the fields of education (6,800), engineering (5,400), sciences (life, 4,900; physical, 4,000) and social sciences (psychology 4,300; the rest plus history 4,100). These are all fields were employment opportunities straddle inside and outside the university, and, in this sense, training and labor markets are not part of the same closed circuit. The total number of PhDs has grown in the past thirty years from around 32,000 to 44,000. Despite its substantial undergraduate numbers, business doctorates now number 1,200 (up from 750 thirty years ago). Presumably the humanities are different insofar as training and employment are internal to the university sector. So too are their numbers smaller. Foreign language comes in at 915 doctorates, philosophy at 586. The English language and literature graduate students, who are teaching so many of these undergraduates composition, have, after a significant trough in the late eighties, only lately recovered their numbers of earned doctorates from 1970, to stand now as they did then at just over 1,600. But the numbers do not speak for themselves. They are always there to tell a story.

A fall and a recovery. Sounds suspiciously like a biblical narrative. Or a business cycle. In graduate education, just where does

faith end and calculating reason pick up? Enter Marc Bousquet. In a stunning series of essays that we are gathered here to reflect upon, Marc has given critical voice to what the numbers (and the eminent President Kerr) would silence. Whether as medieval cloister or grand factory of social reproduction, talk of the university's uses have focused more on its effects than its operations. Governance amongst the boys in the hoods has stood for utopian incandescence issuing from the city on the hill—the self-regulating life of the mind. But if few who walk the hallowed halls of the university (even few who teach) enjoy the full privileges of governance, then how to characterize what maintains order among the great mass of the governed? And if all those others must manage without sovereignty, how is their self-discipline to be taught? So if the university is not exactly a model of democracy, is it not truly the great sorting machine that maintains—whether by merit or entitlement–the hierarchies by which the whole social juggernaut navigates? What if the functionality and rationality of market society were to be measured by the actual ability of the university to allocate people to places? Instead of focusing on those (albeit dwindling) numbers of youth that college attendance actually does keep out of the job market, or the dubious success in accurately placing people within it, what kind of labor does the university reproduce in its midst? Doubtless many kinds.

The academic labor movement has shattered these models of the university as the normative image of society, and advanced the understanding that education is a form of capital that must make for itself certain kinds of labor. Marc's focus then on those who work at teaching composition is not merely a committed account of his own formation, but a study of how the model of reproduction fails. His emphasis is necessarily on the internal circuit of teaching (as opposed to research) labor and capital which would more prosaically be referred to as management, pedagogy, and curriculum. By this reckoning, teaching composition would be the place where the mandate placed on students to generalize themselves as a managerial prerogative of higher education would encounter the non-generalizability of composition labor, what Marc calls the waste product of higher education. Recall all those numbers of PhDs according to discipline. The biggest numbers belong to those fields where doctorates find work outside the University, an open circuit. The relatively lower number of language and literature doctorates belong to a closed circuit, the expendable pool of teachers who all undergraduates encounter. Far from being a haven from the heartless professional world, the University is of that world, and treats those who would aspire to remain within it worse than those who might at least expect to get hired on the basis of their academic training.

As anyone who has taken or taught composition knows, it is cast as a general education requirement. Therein would seem to lie its promise and its problem—something for all, desired by none. Marc Bousquet's work resists such facile dismissal by exploring the larger political stakes of composition as the nexus of labor militancy

and radical pedagogy. To see how composition might have become positioned as it is by what Marc has given voice to, it is worth revisiting a question seemingly lost to the bygone use of the university as the purveyor of knowledge for its own sake, namely; what is "general" in general education? Typically, the idea of the general references some notion of well-roundedness, wholeness, or completeness, against the evident strains of specialization. At least in undergraduate education, specialization presents itself as a division of knowledge into disciplines that stands in anticipation of a division of labor within a professional occupational strata. But when specialization becomes impermanent, the general offers a return to the obligations of work beyond the fulfillment of any particular occupational calling.

If specialization is an application of labor in the concrete, with requisite knowledge attached, the general is something like a will to work, abstracted from any particular commitments. In this light, being well-rounded means knowing how to beat the path of retreat once a speculative bubble loses its industry and you have to work at something else called sales for a third less salary. Or the plant you're working in moves from Buffalo to nowhere and you've got to find something else to specialize in. Here, the requirement of composition references the generally coercive features of the market that present themselves as an individual's dilemma, "how can I pass this?" The ability to pass, to move from requirement to requirement, illustrates the force of generality at work. For labor as something to be exchanged for subsistence rather than fulfillment, the general represents the unassailable belief in the need to work whether or not a career path can lend life a progressive, forward-moving aspect.

In a different key, the ability to see things from beyond the immediacy of speciality also calls forth the wholeness of the ethical subject, and in this respect is touted as a preparation for citizenship. Pluralist democracy intends to be able to make sound decisions on the basis of recognizing and weighing differences of perspective (echoes of Flexner). For this, a perch above self-interest is required. So too is some commonality of knowledge as a basis for shared values. As a political interest, to be broadly educated means to have assembled the parts into a whole. In terms of citizenship, the trick is to render the particularity of this wholeness into an invisible cloth called the fabric of a nation. Since one citizenship must stand against another, this generality is not universal, but it presents itself functionally as what is worthy to be known should one desire (or be required) to be recognized by a given nation state. Breadth entails an assembly of particulars, of individual subjects, much in the way that bourgeois nationhood is to be woven out of sovereign selves.

As a device whereby a particular authority is recognized as a general one, every citizenship is based upon exclusions. The active negative category of citizenship is the foreigner within, the one who fails the requirements of recognition. As a regulatory process of selection and identification, the one who fails composition may

be more salient than the multitude who do not apply to college and bypass the credential of recognition altogether. For college education to serve this purpose, it would have to assume a momentary unity, a formal equality that like citizenship itself, allows all manner of differences to operate. At that point, literacy could stand for a shared aspiration of recognition that bears the national standard. Allegiance to the requirement stands for a commonality said to be general.

The content of this commonality would need to be begged, just as would the minimum number of facts about the country a person would need to know in order to live successfully in one. Such facts are more likely to pertain to traffic regulations than to occupants of the presidency. Yet only those who apply for citizenship (rather than being born with it) will be required to name the presidents. The management of illiteracy of the nation is neatly folded into national management. If it turns out that knowledge is not tantamount to participation, that looks bad for citizenship claims. Worse still would be the suggestion that there is no determinate national content. How could we believe in the generality of the nation if it had no minimum requirements? Formalism is not a bad administrative solution to this problem, if not for national belonging, at least for composition. With the necessary exception of the naturalized immigrant (a population roughly equivalent to that of college students) a test of citizenship would need to be eternally deferred. For those born on national soil, only a crime against the state committed outside it (treason) can constitute citizenship failure. General education promises to stay preparatory and can therefore raise the specter of the immediacy of failure. A preparation failed requires further preparation, so long as the thing being prepared for is kept at bay, separate in time and space.

From the position of laborer and of citizen, general education is a mode of preparation, a pause on its way to life that separates the idyllic academe from some real world mirrored in the campus' placid reflecting pools. Students can learn to labor, but learning cannot be considered labor. Democracy can be taught as a good idea in the past or future, but it can have no present life. Disturb the mirror, fall through the looking glass, and more is disturbed than the ideology of the academy's freedom from life's instrumentalities. The generalities upon which particular versions of labor and citizenship rest would also be shaken—or at least be subject to reflection without the presumption of innocence of perspective. Literacy work in the managed university makes a big splash that renders school and life, labor and informed participation inseparable. While many remain reluctant to admit it, sightings of activated labor within the university are now abundant, and the self-conscious management of the university renders every learning experience into a measurable unit, a real-life outcome instead of an anticipation of life. Now robbed of its preparatory shroud, the general is primed to stand for something else, a momentary statement of the general will.

After so much suspicion expressed over the negative operation of the general with respect to labor and citizenship, it may seem curi-

ous at best to apply something constructive to the concept. But if so much is said to ride on labor so thoroughly devalued as literacy work, the process of revaluation which Marc Bousquet has undertaken needs to be seen primarily as a political act. From a managerial perspective, the casualization of academic labor, whether through expansion of adjunct positions or full time non-tenure bearing lines, responds to that peculiar regimen of the academy—tenure as permanent employment. While a form of wage labor, tenure suggests that labor is bound and not free, self-determining and not disposable or replaceable. While tenure is meant to enshrine academic freedom, it is also taken as a threat to the bourgeois right to treat labor in the abstract as a general need whose particular applications matter not (i.e., everyone can be replaced, but at management's discretion). Taking over some control as to how and when the general is asserted offers much more than a rhetorical reversal. The administrative offensive against academic labor begins with the accusation that any expression of organizing is but one interest among many that university managers must balance against other budgetary demands. In other words, labor is but a particular interest and the administration embodies the general will of all constituencies and not also a domain of self-interest.

The generality of labor and of the capacity for decision-making need to be established in this context and against these constraints. Further, the means of self-composition, the questions of affiliation and association, are practical resources that need to be taught. General will amalgamates what labor requires for its self-expression with the ability to critically discern what is required of a given intentionality. The general will expresses the moment at which labor and learning have become mutually constitutive, when the capacity to create becomes self-critical of its means and ends. This is expressed compositionally as a requirement to state one's purpose in regard to all other such statements. The conventional formalist approach to composition enacts its own separation of disciplinary knowledge. Specialization is countered with transparent self-disclosure, through the clarifying prose of the personal essay. As an obligation of every student, this required disclosure is generalized.

It is the composition teacher who confronts this general knowledge directly. Therefore their labor directly encounters this enunciation of self as a requirement. Literacy work is an occasion to present a general kind of participation in knowledge creation before it is subsumed to an instrumental logic of credentialing, and of the capacity to labor before it is subsumed to the ends of employment. Potentially, literacy work offers a self-possessing means to a self-constituted ends. To casualize such labor is therefore broadly and not narrowly economic. Its self organization speaks to the ability to de-marginalize labor organizing as a special interest. A challenge to any such self-organization is that casualization itself is not a singular process. While the tenure-system has medieval roots, the new feudalism of casualization segregates non-tenure bearing full time lines, adjunct, part-time teachers, and graduate student employees.

These have coalesced around separate guilds, consistent with the craft basis of much nineteenth century unionization. Given that all these employment categories are in effect within literacy work, there is at least the opportunity to shift to an industrial basis of organization that would help articulate if not to collapse these differences. By this reckoning, the knowledge industry would consist of universities *and* the various sites outside the academy where education and creation of knowledge takes place, in the professions, in media, in research, in leisure, and the like. Once we see that each form of knowledge production has its own kind of literacy work attached, we move from organizational forms aimed at representing labor per se (like unions) to organizations dedicated to the coordination of society at large. This last operation would need to be attached to an organizational form like a political party with a comprehensive social project.

When education is located outside the academy, it appears much more as constitutive of the social fabric. The casualization of academic labor is but a dimension of labor mobility more broadly. The capacity to dispossess labor from any given instance of its deployment is called flexibility. Education is not only a means of sustaining market claims for upward mobility, it is the medium through which lateral mobility or flexibility is achieved. Lose a job, get retrained. Maintain a job, refine skills. The result of managing this constant uncertainty is, in effect, the causalization of the student outside the academy, or outside the closed circuits of credentialing. The casualized student is, from this perspective, the medium through which labor circulates. Its generic name is adult education. In 1999, of nearly 200 million adults in the United States, over eighty-six million were engaged in some form of adult education (and this up almost 10 million from five years before). This open circuit, coupled with Marc's closed circuit of academic labor gives new resonance to Kerr's formulation that the university is neither of this world nor apart from it. Rather, education itself is a means through which the circulation of labor is achieved. Famously, many revolutionary movements have made literacy their first post-guerilla campaign. These, of course, were organizational efforts where labor and citizenship were themselves being re-imagined. The local and national coalitions of groups that have spawned to contest the shape of the managed university suggest that these organizational questions remain productively open. A key axis of contestation is being drawn where organizational forms are emergent, notably with regards to actually existing unionization.

Part of what is at issue here is how we define the academic labor movement so as to consider what exactly such labors are to produce. Unions have long been under ideological assault for holding the product of labor hostage to its process. Improved working conditions are a matter of self-interest against the greater goods of market excellence. But if what is really at issue in collective bargaining is not wage concessions but loss of autonomy—which in this case means the loss of a monopoly over responsibility for learning—the question of how unionization might transform the work of univer-

sities needs to be considered. Doing so requires rethinking orientations to product measurements encoded in terms like "standards" and "excellence."

Ironically, these are items of quality control that belong to the very industrial histories that university managers have claimed are being unduly imported by organizing efforts. To give one example from my workplace, New York University, graduate student employees (GAs) have been heavily relied upon for composition course work, and, after a protracted struggle, a union was recognized. The opportunity is rarely lost when naming the United Automobiles Workers (UAW) as the bargaining agent for the GAs, to assert the alien character of an automobile worker's greasy pursuits to the pristine halls of the academy. The insinuation of dirty foreigners in this way invokes both anti-communist and racializing imaginaries. Indeed, the argument that workers make an environment industrial parallels the complaint that the mention of race, operating as a mode of social exclusion, is itself a kind of racism. This use of otherness with respect to labor approximates a kind of citizen failure within the academy—those who by testing the limits of participation confront expatriation.

One effect of an administrator's disavowal that there is such a thing as academic labor is to treat internal conflict as a kind of civic disagreement among equals. Like an academic argument, each side has its own point of view, if not equivalent means to have it heard. Displaced from consideration is the more fundamental divide and messier contention over the generation and dispossession of intellectual property—namely over who owns what and to what ends knowledge is made and moves. This last set of issues makes academic unionization so meaningful. By insisting that labor does not belong inside the classroom, university managers can re-inscribe a Victorian ethic of innocent and passive domesticity. They anoint themselves the guardians of a chaste and sacred heart of learning, even as they replace GA positions with lectureships outside the bargaining unit. In offering this stalwart resistance, the administrators propose something altogether more ambitious for unionists to consider, particularly at this formative moment when agendas are being shaped. The scope of what to bargain for is as significant as the opportunity to do so. This has been clearly understood as the UAW has entered into collective bargaining on behalf of adjunct faculty at NYU and raised comprehensive issues like intellectual property rights. Bargaining itself is a means to resolve conflict, not promulgate it. The most significant negotiations over curriculum, pedagogy, and the operations and efficacy of learning must already be transpiring in the classroom. It is not just that the managed university has imported industrial models of labor relations in its invocations of strategic planning and quality control, it also imagines students as both client and product. In both moves, the presumed divide between the substance of learning for its own sake and the instrumentalities of market realities is effaced. Ironically, managerial initiatives within the university help labor to see itself as such. Similarly, calls for participation

in decision making processes adopt a more universal citizenship model with norms of participation and entitlement to local rubrics of university governance based on rank and privilege. The bait and switch of decentralized responsibility and transparent decision can run both ways. Out of the resulting squeeze of labor and management comes the condition for the general will.

Admittedly, pinning organizing efforts on faculty governance is a slippery slope. After all, the infamous Yeshiva decision meant to banish unions from private universities was based on a finding related to governance—that faculty were managerial employees because they deliberated over hiring and firing decisions. Self-management of the institution and autonomy in the dispensation of one's labor were deemed by the US Supreme Court to render academe not a worker's paradise, but a manager's. For Clark Kerr, the chief "practitioners" of the multiversity are the administrators (Kerr, 8). The loss of autonomy does industrialize the academic workplace, but it is unlikely that those who had engineered this loss would be the ones to bring it back. It is worth noting how closely this follows the narratives of independent craft workers in the last decades of the 19th century, and that of professionals at the close of the 20th. In each case, union efforts emerged where captains of industry waxed nostalgic.

Harder still would be to miss what the privatization of education has done to the normative ideals of faculty self-management when boards of corporate managers are responsible for billions in portfolio investment. It is the Board of Trustees who is charged with proprietary responsibility for the institution (and what they might deem its success or failure). In the past two decades, shareholder value came to define civic interest, and also came to govern the university to an unprecedented degree. At the same time that internal administrative initiatives claimed to alloy labor and management, externally managed endowment portfolio investment became a bellwether of mission success that suggested where public and private institutions could converge. This is not a matter of analogy but of genuine shared interest in financial policy on behalf of stock-market expansion or depletion. The shift from entitlement to tax abatement is the signature of government's new compact with the people, and has oriented fiscal policy over the past twenty-five years. In higher education, this monetarist policy emphasis displays a strong symptom in the depreciation (when controlled for inflation and tuition hikes) of the value of direct federal grants to students to a third of what they were in the 1970s, and the rise of tax-deferred privately managed mutual funds for college savings championed by Bill Clinton and expanded under the bear markets of George W. Bush.

It should by now become evident where the radical pedagogy that emerges from literacy work fits into the picture of organizing academic labor. Academic labor is education for others. Development of the conditions for teaching is not only the self-development of the teacher. Critical reflection on learning must also embrace how knowledge operates in the world. This linkage

has not always been the strong suit of radical pedagogies, which can insulate classroom power dynamics from those larger social relations that bring people to and from class. The concept of class is reinforced as a discrete group of people in dialogue rather than as the more historically ambitious notion of a productive association through which people are made interdependent. There may even be an unwitting convergence between norms of collegiality, classroom autonomy, departmentalized localism, and other images of the small but beautiful world, with the reflexive dispensation toward classroom process championed by a certain radical pedagogy. In this regard, the classroom is not most usefully regarded as a metaphor or a metonym of the social world, but a mediating link in that world. This is not to say that radical pedagogues are managerialist, but that managerialism already understands what it needs to appropriate (and what it needs to exclude) of the radical project.

We need to grasp this to respond to claims to be protecting downtrodden minorities (of business or science students), preserving chaste autonomous spheres (for faculty), and maintaining traditions of independence (from worldly industrializations) that carry the attack against unionization. The "we" of organizing and of pedagogy would require some elaboration beyond their particular sites which would be hard pressed to imagine alliances, to say nothing of mutual infusion. The negotiation over what is to be taught, over whose voice counts for what, over what class (in either sense) is for, over what its organization should lead to...needs to be well underway at the point at which collective bargaining begins. The question of how institutional forces bear on classroom dynamics are at once organizational and pedagogical. Who is teaching? How much time do they have to do it? How much time is there for students outside the classroom? These labor process issues are deeply linked to matters of the value produced. What is the learning worth? What is to be done with it? Where does it lead? The accounting of credit hours can sum to a degree without adding up to much. On the other hand, indebtedness has multiple meanings. A plurality of students remain in debt years after graduation. Presumably it would be the task of academic labor organizing to engender other senses of indebtedness (and debt forgiveness). But the material conditions are already there for something of the educational experience to continue to circulate in mind and memory.

If organizing helps to enjoin various classroom experiences by providing a means through which they mediate one another, education's own moments can teach about the operations of any value-giving activity. Activating students, getting them to participate, could no longer be seen as a communalist good in itself (being one by being together), but would be forced to reflect on the question of what that activism was for, and what students would like to be participating in. Academic labor is not responsible for instrumentalizing higher education. But the market-driven insistence that education be for something other than itself need not only lead to vulgar vocationalism and a crush of business majors. Nor is it

desirable to return to the days of demographic innocence (read exclusion) when a few fancy boys could contemplate the life of the mind knowing they had daddy's enterprise to inherit.

If unionization reveals that labor is not something awaiting students outside the university, but is already in their midst, then the critical resources that literacy work can offer may now be mobilized on behalf of questioning what labor for students should be, both now and later. Hopefully, the proliferation of the recognition of labor all around the university will raise the stakes for faculty governance as well. Student debts need not be confined to great works and large banks. Composition work raises the stakes for what the general idea of the university might be. For it poses the question sharply for what interests and intentions we might want to claim indebtedness to. In short, the required statement of self before the universe of possibility offers up labor as that which has and is the capacity to make a world and presents governance as that force that asks what entity (beyond state or employer) can legitimately recognize a generalizing will. Faculty will need to assume some credit not only for how they govern themselves, but for the labor of education as it is unleashed on the world. Ultimately, the question of the uses of the university will be answered by those who are used by it. As the intelligence collected in Marc Bousquet's work so richly attests, the activisms of literacy work have helped to make that world generally available.

Works Cited

Kerr, Clark. *The Uses of the University*, 4th ed. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995.

National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics,* 2001. <http://nces.ed.gov>.

Slaughter, Sheila and Larry L. Leslie. *Academic Capitalism : Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.


PRETTY SNEAKY, SIMS!
ABD