Performativity Culture in Universities: Social Work Fabrications

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Abstract

This paper examines the findings of a study we completed into progressive social work education in Canadian schools of social work. In our research, we found that schools of social work offer three key functions for the university: a connection to the community, a space that values diversity and a space of innovation. We investigate these themes in relation to the dynamics of performativity and fabrication. From conversations with those who participated in our research, it is clear that schools of social work play a key role in the university in terms of constructing a particular institutional image—a fabricated image. We articulate some key aspects of performance that are drawn upon in fabricating contemporary Canadian universities and the ways in which social work is positioned to enhance this fabrication. In the conclusion, we reflect upon what these findings and analysis mean for social work education.

Keywords: Social work, university, fabrication, performativity, neo-liberalism, education

Accepted: 23 June 2013

Introduction

Neo-liberal ideology and regulation, in the form of new managerialism, have been shaping university education internationally for two decades (Davies, 2005; Deem et al., 2007; Farrell and Morris, 2003). Dehli (2010) describes the managerial aspects of neo-liberalism ‘as a political rationality—a way of thinking and knowing that shapes the terms and scope of the political—and the operations and effects of its techniques’ (Dehli, 2010, p. 85). In post-secondary education, new managerialism removes ‘the locus of power from
the knowledge of practicing professionals to auditors, policy-makers and statisticians, none of whom need know anything about the profession in question’ (Davies, 2003, p. 91). While this form of governance is widespread, the impact of new managerialism has been uneven in the manner that it shapes departments within universities and universities as a whole (Bansel and Davies, 2010; Blackmore et al., 2010; Dehli, 2010).

This paper reports on findings from a larger project that explores the ways in which new managerialism is shaping progressive schools of social work in Canada. The term ‘progressive’ is used to describe those schools that centre critical, structural and/or anti-oppressive approaches to social work. These progressive schools are driven by a social justice-oriented mission which focuses on processes of: marginalisation and oppression, equity-seeking groups and values diversity. Each school in this study self-defines as progressive.

In this article, we articulate aspects of performance that are drawn upon in fabricating contemporary Canadian universities and the ways in which social work is positioned to enhance this fabrication. Fabrication is defined as ‘versions of an organization … which does not exist—they are not outside the truth, but neither do they render true or direct accounts’ (Ball, 2004, p. 148). They are the stories institutions tell about themselves, the images they craft, the aspects of themselves they promote and those they hide, or obscure through the projection of other organisational practices, experiences or priorities. Fabrications are highly crafted and controlled. They become shorthand for the institution itself, a simplification that can be easily shared and maintained (Ball, 2004). Fabrications are centrally important in contemporary universities that are characterised by increased governance, commercialisation, increased profit-making practices and growth in distance learning (Smelser, 2013). In this context, we argue in this paper that much of the work happening within schools of social work is used to facilitate an image of the university as having a connection to the community, as a space that values diversity and as a space of innovation.

**Methodology**

This project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and received ethics clearance at two Ontario universities. The data-collection process involved interviewing faculty and students at five schools of social work across Canada. The schools were chosen to offer regional diversity and because they identify themselves as progressive schools of social work. We interviewed at least five faculty members and five students at each site. Participants were selected through key faculty informants as well as the director of each school who were sent an information letter about the project. Any interested faculty and students were asked to contact the researchers. Each interviewee gave written consent to participate.
in the project. Interviewers used an interview guide to explore people’s experiences with administration, teaching, learning and research at the university. In addition, data have also been collected through a focus group for directors of the five participating schools. A similar interview guide was used to shape this discussion. Team members also reviewed and analysed key texts from Schools of Social Work and Canadian universities including reports, governance documents. In addition, team members explored websites of multiple Canadian universities (not limited to participating schools in our research) to investigate connections between our data, the universities’ images and the analysis we were developing from our interviews.

The entire research team meets three to four times a year to discuss our individual analysis of the data, the literature that we are reading and the various questions that the work is raising for us. Subgroups of this team meet more regularly to discuss the analysis as it is developing. This paper began to take shape after the team reflected upon interview data that are being managed through NVIVO. We were seeing themes emerge around the ways in which progressive schools of social work strategically position themselves within institutions. We found schools of social work offer three key functions for the university: a connection to the community, a space that values diversity and a space of innovation. Patterns, themes and categories have come together through a reflexive process driven by what the inquirer wants to know and how the inquirer interprets data through theoretical frameworks and subjective perspectives (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009). Our data analysis is a reflexive iterative process in which the data were revisited and connected with ‘emerging insights, progressively leading to refined focus and understandings’ (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009, p. 77). Through this iterative process, the research question and propositions were gradually refined through ongoing data collection and literature reviews during a variety of research cycles this resulted in a combination of research strategies within one project (Kerssens-van Drongelen, 2001). Through this continued iterative process of analysis, we arrived at the arguments we present in this paper.

**Fabrication of the university through marketing**

In many Western countries, a severe lag in state funding for higher education has intensified competition between universities. There is an extensive international literature exploring how, in the UK, Australia, USA and Canada, institutions of higher education are being pushed to become less reliant on public funding and more market-oriented (Bay, 2011; Hayrinen-Alestalo and Peltola, 2006; Mok, 2010). The moves to new managerialist practices in post-secondary education are particularly well documented in the UK (Deem et al., 2007; Kok et al., 2010; Miller, 1998). These pressures have resulted in higher education being reconceptualised from a social good to a
commodity to be bought and sold. In this way, universities hope to attract more private funding and to situate students as consumers (Davies, 2005). Many universities have hired advertising and public relations organisations to help craft their image (Ollsen and Peters, 2005). This, in turn, has led to an increased focus on performance measures drawn upon for marketing purposes (Madgett and Bélanger, 2008). New managerial processes are focused on ongoing auditing, ranking and creating definable outcomes. As a consequence, educators operate in a:

... baffling array of figures, performance indicators, comparisons and competitions—in such a way that the contentments of stability are increasingly elusive, purposes are contradictory, motivations blurred and self worth slippery. Constant doubts about which judgments may be in play at any point mean that any and all comparisons have to be attended to. What is produced is a state of conscious and permanent visibility (or visibilities) at the intersection of government, organisation and self-formation (Ball, 2001, p. 212).

Blackmore and Sachs (2007) suggest that, in this complex and uncertain context, universities ‘have sought to maintain legitimacy ... through an emphasis on the symbolic and the performatve’ (Blackmore and Sachs, 2007, p. 107). We draw upon Lyotard’s (1984) notion of performativity, which is a technology and a culture in which knowledge is no longer valued for its truthfulness, but is instead valued for its most efficient input/output equation. Traditional regimes of autonomous professional power are replaced with regimes of performance management that seek to codify knowledge. This technology acts as a form of regulation of performance and knowledge through comparisons and displays to become a ‘performance audited’ society (Duncan, 2007). Measures of productivity and output coupled with displays of quality represent the worth of an individual or part of an organisation within a field of judgement (Ball, 2003).

Performativity culture has become embedded in universities, shifting the organisations ‘from a focus on issues of value and ideology to issues of institutional systematic and economic performativity’ (Blackmore and Sachs, 2007, p. 107). Within late capitalist societies, this performativity captures both the state’s managerialist (efficient and effective) and evaluative (symbolic) aspects to produce new ‘managerial or managerialized identities’ (Blackmore and Sachs, 2007, p. 109). Ball argues that the reaction or response to performativity is one of fabrication (Ball, 2004). Fabrications ‘are versions of an organization (or person) which does not exist—they are not outside the truth, but neither do they render true or direct accounts’ (Ball, 2004, p. 148). In response to the technologies of performativity, organisations (and people) select among various representations a version of themselves.

As part of this global trend, administrators in Canadian universities are increasingly invested in creating an image that students, their parents, corporate donors and the general public will consume (Abaya, 2008). Performance-focused marketing has increased the importance of various rankings and
assessments. There are a variety of rankings used to compare universities; in Canada, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is a key indicator of the relative worth of universities that is the most common ranking system that universities use to assess themselves in relation to one another. Other ranking systems have been developed and are used by, for example, popular magazines. These magazines are then marketed to parents and prospective students. The popular Canadian magazine Macleans argues the validity of their fourteen numerical measures by stating:

Macleans marks schools the same way your intro psych professor will mark you. We assess universities on several key skills and then weigh them to find out who is top of the class (Available online at http://oncampus.macleans.ca).

These rankings also become a source for the various stakeholders within a university to decide on the worth of, and make changes within, their institution. This broadening of the field of evaluation to popular commercial magazines and media in general marks just one of the many ways in which the terrain upon which universities operate and are evaluated has become more uncertain (Marginson, 2010). Even though universities have highlighted the lack of scientific rigour in these assessments, the rankings remain so important for marketing purposes that most universities continue to participate (Gingras, 2009).

On their website, the Canadian university, McMaster, posits a question to potential donors: ‘Why give to McMaster?’ In response, the webpage provides a series of bullets, including ‘Because we are one of only four Canadian universities ranked in the top 100 universities in the world’ (available online at www.mcmaster.ca/impact/giving_why.html). The website explains further that the ranking is based on a system developed by China’s Shanghai Jiao Tong University, which bases its findings on:

Several criteria of academic and research performance including Nobel prize winners, frequently cited researchers, scholarly articles that appear in Nature and Science, and the per capita performance of the institution (Available online at http://dailynews.mcmaster.ca/article/mcmaster-named-one-of-the-worlds-top-100-universities/).

What is interesting about these ranking systems is that they reflect global standardised measures outside of national approaches to public policy governance, but become the university’s measurement even when the sources of the rankings may be poorly understood in the Canadian context.

University administrators have become invested in these fabrications as fundamental to survival (Abaya, 2008) due to the necessity of marketing in a competitive market. Rankings (such as NSSE) are further important, since they influence government funding as well as aid in recruiting graduates and academic staff through appealing to elusive measures of quality (Marginson, 2010).
The pressure on universities to develop new consumers (students) and funders (Blackmore et al., 2010) is increasingly divorced from the institution’s larger purpose of knowledge production. The performance fabrication becomes an end in itself. The university must fabricate itself as performing efficiently and effectively. Through these mechanisms, two key features of new managerial regulation, ‘the spectacle’ (as a semiotic image, or what might be referred to as an ‘enacted fantasy’ (Butler, 1990, as quoted in Ball, 2012)) and ‘efficiency’, are manifest become entwined (Ball, 2012). The questions of efficiency for what purpose or the substance of the knowledge production remains largely obscured by the spectacle of competitive marketing.

In performative cultures, universities spend increasing amounts of time making themselves accountable, devoting more resources to reporting on what they do rather than on actually doing it. The skills that are valued in this context are those ‘of presentation and of inflation, making the most of ourselves, making a spectacle of ourselves’ (Ball, 2012, p. 19). With the focus on image, ‘performativity leads institutions and their leaders in particular to construct institutional fabrications that are about escaping from the gaze rather than being more transparent’ (Blackmore and Sachs, 2007, p. 117).

**Performativity and schools of social work**

Strategies to fabricate the best image of a department within the university is both part of a new managerialist ethos and a resistance to the practices of surveillance put into play through new managerialism. In making a spectacle of the departmental unit, one can gain limited control over practices that are largely regulated by university administrators.

Our data show that social work professors are aware of this particular negotiation, between their commitment to social justice and progressive education and the current neo-managerialist mechanisms of value within the university administrative structure. There is an awareness of the ways in which the work of the school is noticed and repackaged to create the desired university spectacle. As one director states, the role of director is often:

…pragmatic so I don’t try to deconstruct what the value base is of what’s coming at me from up there [i.e. higher administration] because otherwise I will be in constant depression or anger or whatever. So I try to just see whether we can’t do what’s being asked pragmatically and that we then do that in a way here, we organize ourselves in a way that fits with whatever our social justice mission is.

In our study, we have isolated three means used to negotiate the performative university in a pragmatic fashion. Each mechanism is explored below.
Challenging the ivory tower: community/university engagement

A key message fabricated by universities is that they are no longer ‘ivory towers’ but are engaged in their communities. For example, the University of Calgary has created a Centre for Community Engaged Learning. The emphasis of community and service learning is accentuated:

Curricular service-learning is often limited to small, short-term activities because it is built into a single course within the academic calendar. However, it can still have a tremendous impact on student learning and community development (Available online at www.ucalgary.ca/ccel/curricular).

On McMaster University’s website, a social work graduate speaks of learning about her engagement in social justice practices and dialogue with communities. Her quote is offered in the section of the website devoted to the impact of funders’ donations under a subheading entitled ‘A window into our community-connected learning’:

The social change course for me highlighted the importance of expanding our awareness about social injustice when creating sustainable social change projects or campaigns. I learned that it is integral that this awareness grow from continued dialogue and partnership with the communities we seek to help (Deborah Tomlinson–Veit, Graduate, School of Social Work ’09, ’11, available online at www.mcmaster.ca/impact/Deborah.html).

The faculty we interviewed were aware of the disconnects and challenges this type of image presents. At the same time, they realised that they had to highlight the strengths of social work as a profession connected to the community to gain positive attention within the institution. For example, a director states:

Part of it is credibility. . . . Part of it is reintroducing what we do, why we do it [and establishing] what we can contribute. If we look costly and different, then [we have to be able to articulate] what are you going to get back from us that is of use to you.

This is part of an embedded practice where social work schools see that they must appear functional and useful to the university more broadly. Thus, schools work to position themselves as expert community players, whether this is within the university community or the broader community:

Part of that is then sending the faculty out to do things so that we are being of use [to the university]. So, we may not be of use to get more people in seats but what we may be of use for is to run a particular project that the dean might be excited about or being on a committee that profiles the university in a different way. Or being on an initiative that profiles the university or citizenship in different university bodies. So, it’s a matter of really encouraging faculty to be out and about in a way. We are a teeny department compared to a lot of them and yet [we are] out and about to make some difference in the world, and to give back to the university and the university’s broader community . . . . Sometimes we talk about pimping some of us.
For progressive schools of social work that have trouble marketing themselves as offering a cost-effective product, positioning one’s department in terms of good citizenship is intimately tied to the broader image that the university is trying to create. If the good citizen is relevant, responsive to the community and possesses concrete experience in the workforce, schools of social work have a key role to play.

Field education has long been a foundational aspect of social work education. In the current climate in which community-based learning experiences are increasingly valued, social work is well positioned as having an expertise in fabricating the community-based, experiential university. As one director notes:

Some of what we provide back to the university is a sort of sustaining, fostering, contributing to experiential community engaged learning as the flavor of the month . . . we look rightly as the people who have skills [in this area].

Increasingly, education is made sense of with ‘use-value (i.e. the value to subjects themselves) and not exchange — value (wider symbolic value/legitimacy)’ (Archer, 2008). In this context, the spectacle of the school of social work is vitally important to the use-value of the university. The applied aspects of our programmes help fabricate a university that is rational, accountable and practical. The applied nature of social work education momentarily privileges social work over other humanities and social science programmes who are increasingly marginalised as irrelevant in the neoliberal overvaluation of those aspects of education that are recognised as concretely useful. Thus, social work, while perhaps not performing as well in terms of economic efficiency and the mass production of students, does perform extremely well in meeting other stated institutional objectives.

This tension is exacerbated by the fact that, while the university values the work of schools of social work in terms of crafting a particular image relevant to the community, cash-strained institutions are often pulling resources from social work schools and, in particular, from areas related to field education, leaving schools with an image that has little substance (Todd et al., 2012).

We found in our study that field education is particularly pressured within an efficiency-oriented university:

So when the field co-ordinator said I’d like to take a year of absence . . . not our director, not our Dean, but the VP financial says, ‘right, [then] the field co-ordinator position will [be reduced to] 75% then . . . it is literally a Monday to Thursday noontime position’.

This quote illustrates not only the ways in which resources that are fundamental to field education are being pulled, but also the way such shifts are controlled by the most centralised bodies of the university who have little, if any, knowledge of the daily demands of the work. The following informant illustrates the intensification that the reduction in resources and increased enrolments causes:
I came to [x university] when [x university] had its first cohort of BSW students...that first year there were about 35 students [in field] and right now I deal with 135–140 students a year and I’m the same person and it is the same job except it’s bigger. I learn to manage things by putting policies in place, but the number of students, number of interviews, and number of meetings has grown astronomically...its a very different kind of place.

The university’s commitment to the image of community connectedness results in greater demands in this type of education (through increasing enrolments) but, while this happens, resources for field education are diminished. This is hindering the abilities of schools of social work to successfully place students in quality field placement settings and, as our informant suggests, is even changing the very nature of the university.

The university as embracing diversity

In addition to fabricating itself as experiential and community-focused, the contemporary university is interested in sustaining the recognisable brand of the liberal university as embracing diversity. The university has had to challenge the image of itself as a bastion of whiteness in order to appeal to new markets, namely racialised Canadians and international scholars and students (Ahmed, 2012).

For example, McGill characterises itself not only as an institution situated in a diverse urban environment, but also as a place that thrives through diversity:

Like the city of Montreal itself, we thrive on diversity. Our students and faculty come to McGill from more than 150 countries, enlivening our campuses with multilingual, multicultural vitality. We’re dedicated to bringing together people from a wealth of backgrounds, who use the meaningful exchange of beliefs and experiences as a pathway to creation and discovery (Available online at http://archive-ca.com/page/52027/2012-06-14/ http://www.mcgill.ca/about/intro).

The valuing of diversity is also an important tool for fundraising. A key reason McMaster University cites to encourage people to donate is ‘Because we believe in a community that is diverse, inclusive and open to sharing new ideas’ (available online at www.mcmaster.ca/impact/giving_why.html).

Certain universities also ensure their websites contain information promoting them as queer positive spaces where queer students and their parents can feel comfortable, safe and welcomed. University of Victoria has promoted that it is including degendered washrooms in all of its new buildings for the comfort and safety of transgendered students (Proudfoot, 2008). Similarly, on the Ryerson University website, one can find them promoting their support for queer youth: ‘The Ryerson community stood united in purple pride at the It Gets Better Because We Make It Better event, in support of LGBT youth’ (available online at www.ryerson.ca.
Most progressive Canadian schools of social work have made diversity central to their mission with an understanding of the complexities of working towards a truly integrated diverse environment. One of the key ways of diversifying is by encouraging and, in some cases, targeting for diversity in the faculty and student complements. Participants at two different universities spoke about their leadership in creating more inclusive spaces within the university. The first stated ‘We’ve been taking a leadership for 25 years within [name of university] for Affirmative Action administration policies’, while another commented:

I think another strand of drawing out what the university sees as useful . . . is the way we talk and sometimes act about equity issues . . . and building a more inclusive community on campus and stuff like that . . . . We’ve worked hard and got support for appointments for Aboriginal scholars both of which are good for us . . . . But they are also institutionally really useful. You know, they’re like here’s the poster child appointment [for the university].

While the schools of social work address the needs of the fabricated university by being departments that take diversity seriously, participants in our study are aware that diversity is a complicated social relationship that requires nurturing and attentiveness. As the following participant notes:

We’ve been attempting to be more inclusive in our program, reaching out to more marginalized communities, trying to be more responsive to students with disabilities. The consequence though is that faculty need support in trying to support the students and the students need support. You don’t just invite people in and then say, ‘Have a good time.’

Efforts to have Aboriginal, racialised, disabled and queer faculty and students participate fully in schools of social work are often a reflection of strongly held political beliefs. For some, it is felt that these political efforts are both useful but also somewhat sullied once they are deployed strategically in the university to fabricate an image of an inclusive space, for marketing purposes. It is a complex relationship that allows for growth in diversity with a caution that the use of and support for the diversity may be limited.

The fabrication of the university as a place of diversity becomes quite discomforting when research participants argue that the university’s inclusive image contrasted sharply of isolation, marginalisation and exclusion of Aboriginal, racialised, disabled and queer faculty and students. A racialised faculty member discusses this tension:

I have people say to me, ‘shall I ever only be a one-trick pony?’ . They’ll bring me out when there is a human rights or equity issue and then otherwise you are part of the invisible.

Such statements by racialised faculty members are in stark contrast to the fabrication of the university as inclusive and celebrating diversity. It creates a sense of vulnerability. What if the fabrication shifts? What if positioning the university as embracing diversity becomes less important at the level of
image? The university’s commitments to diversity seem so superficial as to leave many racialised faculty on tenuous terrain.

University as synonymous with innovation

The third mechanism for the fabrication of the university is the university’s investment in an image of pedagogical innovation. There is an ongoing pressure for universities to make products appear new and desirable for the consumer. The need to appear innovative is related to the evaluation and ranking of universities discussed earlier:

Since 2003 global rankings have fed into the accelerating ‘arms race’ in investments in innovation . . . University rankings give form to the idea of the global knowledge economy . . . They show governments and multinational business firms where knowledge power lies and lock universities firmly into the political economy (Marginson, 2010, p. 19).

Once in this political economy, the university is continually marketing itself as new and innovative. Participants in this study are often involved in creating transformative pedagogy in order to increase students’ understandings of social relations and these efforts facilitate the image of the innovative, new university. Examples of these pedagogical innovations include classroom experimentations in online learning, and through community projects linked to the classroom. A research participant offers an example of pedagogical innovation:

I remember in faculty meeting having discussions about how we would include communities around [names public housing developments] and the gay community. So . . . I was invited to take the course into the community. It was at the [local community centre]. There were students in their 4th year [BSW], and community members and community workers were [also] invited to join that course. Well you have community members with very little education, never mind tertiary education and they are very interested in the material. They said . . . ‘you come on Tuesday night and you teach and we don’t get all of it, so can you come back on Saturday?’ I didn’t mind [doing that] because it was so interesting to have a space where people could share stories and learn the material. I was only able to do it once though.

Another example of pedagogical innovation was described by one of the research team members who had a local television station in their classroom filming the results of a ‘new’ partnership between the school of social work and the university’s theatre company where actors performed as clients in the classroom. The ‘spin’ that the media took was in terms of both its ‘newness’ and that this approach provided excellent ‘training’ for future social workers. At the same time, this form of innovation is fodder for the performative university. In trying to market their products as new, the value of pedagogical innovation is highlighted across campus websites. McMaster’s recent fundraising campaign was entitled ‘inspiring innovation’ and the accompanying promotional video has a heavy emphasis on the creation of
new technologies, new programmes, new leaders and new spaces (www.mcmaster.ca/mcmastercampaign/default.html#). Similarly, Nova Scotia’s Dalhousie University website boasts that ‘Dalhousie continuously fosters academic innovation, in pedagogical practice, program objectives, curriculum design and degree structures. The approachable professors at Dalhousie engage students in collaborative and experimental learning environments’ (available online at www.dalhousie.ca).

The faculty within the schools of social work are aware of the institutional call for innovation. As one director notes, this call for innovation is tied to the breakneck speed of neo-liberal politics and the urgency of continual creation of image:

> When you have to report on where your department is going over the next five years . . . . You need expansion, and innovation and change . . . like it needs to be exciting and different. So, what you do once you’ve done it, nobody cares because they want the next thing.

This participant goes on to note that there is little interest in quality or the substance of innovation. Instead, in the performative university, innovation is an end in itself. New changes quickly become old and are no longer given the focus and resources to survive. Instead, the university is onto the next marketable innovation in its constant pursuit of an image of contemporary relevance, efficiency and effectiveness.

**Concluding thoughts: disconnections in the performative university**

While those of us in schools of social work often discuss our marginality and vulnerability because we are resource-heavy and therefore tend to be seen as inefficient, other aspects of our programmes are vitally important to the university’s fabrication. The university, as an increasingly complex organisation, is often internally contradictory and our data suggest schools of social work are simultaneously devalued and under threat, while also vital to the promotion of the organisation. This provides the ongoing instability and anxiety that motivates individuals and institutions within the neo-liberal context to become an entrepreneurial self — always improving oneself towards the idealised fabrication (Blackmore and Sachs, 2007; Bansel and Davies, 2010). This contradictory positioning of schools of social work leaves us, as researchers and educators, with questions that we suggest progressive schools of social work might need to consider in this context: Is there a drift in our progressive pedagogy? Do we understand all of our losses as we strategise for our survival in the contemporary university? Is our type of community engagement genuine and adequate due to inadequate resources? How can we ensure that our commitment to diversity and community is tied to social justice and remains central to our curriculum?
At this point, we have identified three key ways the activities within schools of social work enable the contemporary university to fabricate a consumable image of itself. These three key semblances are: the university as grounded in the community; the university as engaging diverse faculty and students; and the university as invested in student engagement through innovative education. In concrete terms, this image is enabled through field education; the hiring and admission practices of schools of social work that draw in queer, Aboriginal, disabled and racialised scholars and students, and social work’s success in developing innovative pedagogies. These practices are highlighted to create a community-based, inclusive and innovative fabrication of the university that appeals to an array of stakeholder interests.

The fabricated university creates an alternative opportunity for resource-intensive programmes like social work to be valued. Our graduates tend not to provide the university with endowments, we do not tend to attract corporate investment and the practical components of our programmes severely constrain the numbers of students (read government funding) that we can secure for the institution. In the context of neo-liberalism, where the core mechanism for assessing value is always economic, schools of social work seem vulnerable. In response, the educators we have spoken to have to find alternative means of making our contribution valued. This is, however, a fraught strategy particularly for those who understand themselves as deeply committed to social justice. As one director stated:

I think that social justice social workers don’t move very well with the times because they are constructed as giving in or selling out. So that would be one of the biggest tensions for me because I see myself as actually still being the social justice person, but really working with the challenges. How do you do that when the whole environment is changing and you don’t have much control?

So, the tensions within many schools of social work are between the integrity of our commitment to social justice and the strategies we use to remain relevant to, and good citizens within, the neo-liberal university.

In order to remain within the contemporary university, resource-intensive professional schools such as social work are working strategically to be valued in an environment that privileges those programmes that are low-cost, can process large numbers of students and draw new funding sources into the university. These strategies are authentically innovative, promote diversity and encourage community-based experiential learning. They are well within the possibility of social justice pedagogy that imagines new social relations, new forms of access and imaginative engagement in citizenry. Social work plays an important role in facilitating the fabrication that the university wants to project to students, parents, governments and corporations. The practicum components of schools of social work help universities disrupt the image of the ‘ivory tower’ and instead market themselves as providing ‘real world education’ with workplace skill development and direct connections with the
labour market. The commitments that schools of social work have made to hire diverse faculty, admit diverse students and develop inclusive policies are used by the university to fabricate itself as inclusive. Finally, our pedagogical innovations often result in strong student engagement numbers and are often showcased as innovative and new pedagogy within the university. It seems to us centrally important that schools of social work build on these strengths in order to ensure their survival, while all the time remaining vigilant to the co-optation of our work. This vigilance, we hope, will cultivate our ability to take strategic advantage of opportunities for invigorating a more radical vision of social work education—one that engages concretely with a vision of social justice.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding this research.

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