The Humanities in the Age of Austerity: A Case Study from the University of North Dakota

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Introduction

In January 2018, I took the helm of North Dakota Quarterly, a public humanities journal housed at the University of North Dakota. In the previous year or so, we had seen our budget eliminated including the funding for our long-serving managing editor and our subscription manager. This occurred amid a series of budget cuts across the university, a change in university leadership, and a new budget model backed by a new strategic plan and a newly clarified set of institutional priorities.

The changes at the University of North Dakota were both predictable and shocking. On the one hand, the cuts to North Dakota Quarterly were not a surprise. We had been operating on borrowed time for at least a few years and had struggled to adapt our venerable publication to the changing landscape of publishing and higher education. On the other hand, the increased scrutiny of the budget across campus, academic programs, and the work rhythms of faculty and staff were unsettling and threw the largely peaceful culture of university life into tumult. As someone who had worked at UND for almost 15 years, I can honestly say that nothing prepared me for how quickly campus culture changed.

I was not prepared to compete with my colleagues in other colleges for resources and students. The sudden attention to such minutia as the percentages in faculty contracts, enrollment numbers in upper level classes, and the square footage of offices seemed misplaced and distrustful. The growing use of digital tools to measure and document faculty productivity and student progress seemed intrusive and, at best, redundant with longstanding practices and, at worst, reductionist or crassly corporate. It felt like certain members of the administration had committed to stifling the longstanding North Dakota practice of doing more with less, by insisting instead that we do what the administration expected with less. Whatever collective spirit and camaraderie that the former developed, the latter undermined. In just under two years, the university culture seemed to shift from one of creativity and collaboration to one of compliance and coercion.

Like many of my colleagues, I looked both locally and nationally to understand the context for these changes. I read widely in both the latest and classic books on higher education policy, criticism, and history. I even agreed to teach a class on the budget cuts and to serve as chair of the Graduate Committee and to represent the Graduate School on the Senate Budget Committee. My hope is that engaging the budget cuts as a intellectual problem, I could come to understand the shifting culture at UND and nationally and find ways to turn the soured campus culture into the refreshing lemonade of field study.

The following essay is my first effort to understand systematically the changes at UND within the wider context of reform in the academy. The essay is grounded in three approaches. First, I was guided by the work of Christopher Newfield in the higher education budgeting and finance (Newfield 2016); Louis Menand (2010), David Labaree (2017), and Stefan Collini (2017) on university policy and rhetoric; and John Thelin (2010), Laurence Veysey (1965), Charles


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Dorn (2016) on the history of higher education. Next, David Harvey (2005), David Graeber (2015), and James C. Scott (2009; 2012) have helped me to grasp the interaction of neoliberalism, bureaucracy, and the creative freedoms of anarchy. The various critiques of Taylorism and in the market offered by these scholars resonated with my experiences studying the Bakken oil patch (Caraher and Weber 2017; Caraher et al. 2017), critiques of technology (Morozov 2013; Kansa 2016; Caraher 2016), and general despair for life in a modern world wracked by eviction (Desmond 2016; Bruder 2017), expulsions (Sassen 2014), and borders and refugees (Jones 2016; Andersson 2014). Two works in particular motivated me to think harder. Mark Fleming’s critique of neoliberal time discipline among mass transit workers in San Francisco (Fleming 2016) and Gary Hall’s book on the “uberification” of the university (Hall 2016). These two works helped crystalize in my mind the complex intersection of rhetoric, neoliberal practice, and the deeply entrenched commitment to see the world (as well as the university) in terms of winners and losers.

My essay is a product of this motley reading list, my experiences as a spectator and participant in the recent changes at the University of North Dakota, and conversations with students, colleagues and administrators. My hope is that even if I’m wrong in my reading of our current situation at UND, my essay will still do good.

**Austerity, State, and the Market**

Terms like austerity have acquired a good bit of ideological and intellectual baggage in recent times, and my use of the term in this essay will do nothing to reverse these trends. For this article, austerity is short-hand for a larger neoliberal package of ideas that actively privileges the market as the dominant force in shaping society. These ideas initially developed at a macro-economic scale in the immediate post-war period as a challenge to Keynesianism and as a critique of mid-century views of statist projects in both response to the expanding influence of the Soviet Union and in the aftermath of Nazism. It became a cornerstone of Thatcher’s and Reagan’s re-imagining both of the national and then the global economy. In this context, neoliberal thinkers and politicians argued that state institutions were impediments to a person’s economic (and even social) freedom, and this ultimately undermined the potential for innovation and entrepreneurship. The economic authority that the state expressed through the control over resources and bureaucratized regulation stifled individual creativity and competition while also insulating certain sectors of the economy into complacency.

These political attitudes offered a moral framework for an economic view that saw the flow of state funds into the economy as encouraging inflationary conditions which dampened markets, weakened the private sector, and impaired economic growth. Austerity represented a strategy to withdraw the economic influence of the state in the economy, to forestall inflation, and to allow for markets and the private sector to produce growth. Whatever the economic merits of this approach (and recent work has cast significant doubts on whether austerity does stimulate growth), there is no doubt that these policies have weakened the social safety net created during the Great Depression, turned massive quantities of public assets over to an increasingly wealthy super elite, and transformed the global political and economic landscape. My interest is on how these
measures have impacted higher education and, in particular, played a part in the de-funding of North Dakota Quarterly. It seems to me that three elements of neoliberal policies have had a particularly significant impact on higher education: 1) the belief that markets and competition represent individual freedom, (2) the success in market competition reflect both the personal and public good, and (3) that market competition produces efficiencies by undermining the complacency of publicly-funded entrenched interests.

The impact of these three attitudes on higher education in the U.S. has been dramatic. This is partly because neoliberal faith in market competition shares certain parallels with the long-standing belief in the free interplay of ideas and meritocratic competition within academia. In recent times, however, the emphasis in neoliberal rhetoric on the moral good of market competition and view of the market as the ultimate expression of individual freedom has converted this confidence in the diverse and varied meritocracy to a more totalizing, or perhaps even hegemonic, commitment to the market. In other words, individuals within and outside of the academy, both in the administration, in the legislators, among alumni, and in the trenches, have seen market forces as beneficial agents of change and as justification for whole-sale revisions in curricula and educational policies. These attitudes reflect what David Harvey has recognized as the hegemonic power of neoliberal thinking that makes it very hard for us to imagine alternative ways of doing things (Harvey 2005).

These forces played out in the recent history of North Dakota Quarterly in a number of intriguing and informative ways. The Quarterly lost its funding amid a series of rather dramatic budget cuts at the state level. These budget cuts reflect both the changing economic fortunes of the state and, more directly, the price of oil, as well as a reluctance by legislators to raise taxes to fund public enterprises and services. For many in the legislature, the desire to keep the state friendly to business by cutting taxes and regulation (and, ideally, allowing market forces to generate growth rather than legislative programs) coupled with a tendency to see public, higher education as too long protected from market forces and therefore inefficient (by definition). Raising taxes too support state programs, then, would have made the state less friendly to business and limited the freedom of individuals to use their funds to pursue whatever education they desired.

To be clear, NDQ received funding from the university, and more specifically, the College of Arts and Sciences, and not directly from the state. Its loss of funding demonstrates how entrenched the ideas of austerity are within the university. At UND, North Dakota Quarterly saw the direct impact of these cuts in large part because for previous few years, we had been urged to produce a "sustainable business model" for the journal. This seemed to suggest that the existing model for NDQ which combined funds from the College of Arts and Sciences with income from subscriptions was no longer sustainable, despite being in place for over 60 years. Its lack of sustainability, at least in the rhetoric of our administrators, reflected an expectation that projects like NDQ should be able to subsist largely on private funds. In other words, sustainability was something that existed only in the private sector rather than as a shared commitment supported by public and private resources. This, of course, parallels the larger trends and attitudes toward public higher education more broadly which has long relied upon both public and private sources of funding.

The reasons for de-funding NDQ, however, go beyond simple issues of fiscal austerity. Our
declining number of subscribers, questions about the impact of the publication on the broader UND community and mission, and perhaps even a lack of direction all contributed to a less than charitable viewing of the Quarterly. It is difficult, however, to avoid viewing these critique — offered both tacitly and explicitly — as valuations on the sustainability of the Quarterly in anything other than market terms. The intellectual or humanistic impact of the Quarterly was, as far as I know, never called into question, and paradoxically, validated and recognized (if not exactly celebrated) NDQ’s continued record of achievement.

Academic administrators have used a similar set of curious arguments to justify cuts to the humanities more generally. Declining enrollments, for example, demonstrate lack of market demand for particular subjects, and, consequently, administrators withdraw resources to those programs. The reduction of resources almost always accelerate the decline in enrollments into the future. The justification for this, of course, is largely financial. The university has limited resources and need to support those programs that have the most students.

At the same time, these arguments also coincide with a rhetorical position that sees the arts and humanities at state universities, in particular, as luxuries (see Kleinman 2016). The critique of this position is well-know, so I’ll address it here only briefly. Attacks on the humanities and arts by politicians have tended to argue that they are not only useless degrees that produce students who are a burden on society, but also that the character of a humanities education is the deeply suspect hotbed of post-modernism, anti-nationalism, liberalism, and other nefarious positions that undermine the shared values of the community and social cohesion. The merging of moral judgements about the character of humanities’ programs in higher education and the purported lack of viability of humanities’ graduates in the marketplace is consistent with the larger ideological project of contemporary neoliberalism. The market is not only the source of resources, but also operationalizes the opinio communis, reflects the values of a society, and optimizes the flow of resources to areas best suited for the future of society.

Oddly enough, while political leaders point to the market to explain declines in funding for the humanities, the continued demand for humanities’ graduates complicates their expectations. Humanities graduates tend to earn less than their peers in the STEM (Sciences, Technology, Engineering, and Math) in the short-term, but over time, individuals with humanities degree can earn as much and even more than graduates with more apparently practical education. Moreover, companies consistently demand more graduates with the qualifications that humanities’ graduates possess: the ability to read, to write, to think critically and morally, and to problem solve. Taking nothing away from graduates in other fields at the university, there is no real reason to see that humanities graduates are less viable in the market-driven workforce than graduates in any other field.

The reason for this tendency to diminish the prospects of humanities’ graduates among political and campus leaders invested in austerity appears to be largely a rhetorical one in which the usual line of causality is reversed. The moral economy of neoliberalism has tended to see failure in the market as a moral failing. In the case of the humanities, however, the critique of the market and neoliberalism by scholars of the humanities may represent a moral failing to individuals committed to austerity (even though the lines between neoliberalism and post-modernism are well-known among scholars (e.g. Harvey2005, xx-xx)), and this, in turn, makes them less likely to be successful in
the private sector, despite evidence to the contrary.

As a result, cutting the humanities and focusing energy on the practical and STEM fields is seen as a way to make the university more competitive in the marketplace on the basis of a kind of moral reasoning rather than practical data. That the humanities have seen declining numbers — in part as a result of this inversion of neoliberal logic — has become the evidence that students are "voting with their feet," rather than the result of critical attention in the media or among legislators or funding cuts to promoting the humanities on campus. In this context, defunding a project like North Dakota Quarterly, then, becomes an opportunity to demonstrate a commitment to practical education and short-term workforce development as well as a rejection of morally-suspect fields of the arts and humanities. The argument that NDQ did not develop a sustainable business model (i.e. a model that relies on the market for sustainability at least in large part) is both true and confirms the larger perspective that the humanities are not viable fields in the contemporary economy and do not deserve continued public support.

This is, of course, largely theater, but a particularly pernicious kind of theater (1) that reflects the internalization of certain aspects of neoliberalism among faculty and administrators (in a way that suggests Antonio Gramsci’s idea of hegemony), (2) that confounds the efficient operation of a university (which confirms the argument that the public sector is intrinsically less efficient than the private sector), and (3) replaces the aspirations for a genuinely meritocratic kind of competition — a marketplace of ideas — with a crasser, less productive, but far more public, race to the bottom.

Performing Austerity

In the first part of my essay, I make the uncontroversial argument that the most recent round of budget cuts reflects a kind of local level implementation of the neoliberal policy of austerity. Austerity reflects certain moral and economic attitudes that see the state as morally corrupting, as tending to limit freedom, and as stifling to economic growth which is best achieved by allowing market forces to play out in an unconstrained way. This has negative implications for state universities which are seen as an extension of the state and as intrinsically inefficient. Moreover, these institutions reproduce a kind of complacency that undermines the competitive function of markets, which are seen as the primary engines for economy growth. Cutting higher education budgets, then, pushes these institutions to exist in a market driven world, should improve efficiency by fostering competition for resources, and ensures that capital does not get bottled up supporting institutions that reflect values that run counter to the market ethos.

The internal response to these policies was dramatic as the University of North Dakota not only implemented a “new budget model” based on the competitive allocation of resources across campus, but also, when faced with the immediate pressures of budget cuts, implemented austerity measures that adversely impacted the humanities and arts (as well, to be fair, as other divisions on campus). As I noted in the first part of this essay, North Dakota Quarterly lost all of its funding after being told that we had not produced a sustainable business model. In the second part of this paper, I want to suggest that most of these changes at UND (and I would suggest nationally) amount to a kind of theater designed to align the appearance of competition and market driven policies with a
series of outcomes deemed desirable by local stakeholders.

To be clear, higher education has always cultivated this kind of theater. Whether it was the historical privileging of white, upper and middle class, males, or the tendency to see traditional liberal arts and humanities degrees as superior in content and rigor, the American university system has long attempted to normalize the ascendency of certain groups and to produce outcomes that appear to be a kind of natural result of broader social competition. Recently, David Labaree has summarized a particularly obvious expression of this kind of competitive theater in the long-term persistence of the academic hierarchy among colleges and universities in the U.S. (Labaree 2017). A relatively small number of schools and scholars tend to dominate the intellectual landscape of American higher education. Not only do top tier schools hire faculty from other top tier schools, but lower tier schools also tend to hire a disproportionate number of faculty with degrees from traditionally elite institutions. Lower tier schools see this as a way of imitating the practices of more elite institutions and moving up. In reality, it tends to reinforce the difference between the top tier schools and their lower tier numbers as faculty from elite schools tend to privilege their colleagues at elite schools over students that they produce at lower tier institutions. This bias toward the traditional centers of higher education in the U.S. reproduces itself in competition for grants, fellowships, and even in peer review despite historical efforts to present these competitions as meritocratic.

More recently, critics of higher education have argued that systemic liberal biases within the American university system has promoted certain political and social agendas and suppressed others. Academics have tended to brush off these critiques and point to the rigor of peer review, the competitive nature of grant and hiring processes, and the pressures of historic and global traditions of academic discourse that tend to complicate the alignment of proximate political positions and scholarly outputs. The long tradition of a kind of theater of competition in higher education produced a culture that is particular susceptible to kinds of dissimulation at the core of neoliberal thinking.

It seems to me, however, that the conventional theater of competition in academia (while no less problematic) is similar on the surface to what David Harvey recognizes as the internalization of certain aspect of neoliberalism. The idea that competition and the market dictate the value of even intellectual or academic work extends from across contemporary society to include faculty and administrators in a way that suggests Antonio Gramsci’s idea of hegemony. The most visible expression of this is “zero sum” thinking that organizes campus priorities into winners and losers. Winners get funding (because they’ve won) and losers lose funding with the result that the winning ways of the winners will, over time, come to dominate the losing ways of the losers.

As a result, there already were winners and losers in higher education produced by generations of historical forces which are not necessarily unproblematic or somehow ideally suited (by dint of their co-evolution with market, social, and cultural forces) for efficient education, new knowledge production or social good. Neoliberal priorities, however, at least to those viewing higher education from the perspective of an external stakeholder, nevertheless required a kind of change that reflects the conspicuous pivoting of higher education toward both assumed market needs (or, at very least, away from disciplines overtly critical of the market) and toward the methods of the market. In other
words, whatever the processes that created the current landscape of higher education, we need to align ourselves more clearly with methods and outcomes that reflect contemporary political and economic priorities and, perhaps more importantly, expectations.

The language of these priorities and expectations are well known. Many in the public sphere view the humanities and arts as inefficient, antiquated, or a luxury, despite the emergence of a somewhat disappointing (and perhaps ineffectual) counter-discourse that argues for the economic importance of the degrees in these fields. More importantly, university and state leaders have regularly put forward STEM fields, with their sometimes overtly vocational goals, as a more efficient way to address the economic needs of our communities and, as a result, a better use for limited public funds. Moreover, public support for these fields both drives and ultimately parallels student interest in these economically productive disciplines (and students and tuition dollars will follow), the emphasis on STEM also attracts visible support from the private sector and federal grants.

A secondary challenge, and one that is of more interest to me, whether it is possible to make the rise of STEM in higher education appear to be the historical result of market competition within the institution. It seems to me that this has some value because it allows administrators to tout and stakeholders to recognize the synchronization between market efficiencies within and outside of these institutions. The rise of STEM fields, in this instance, allows higher education administrators to point to the efficiency of their institutions because ultimately the same results suggest the same internal mechanisms. This involves a certain, and conspicuous, amount of dissimulation, particularly as universities attempt the dual move of shifting to support fields that the public expects to be market driven priorities and demonstrating that market priorities and methods produced these results internally. The former ensures stakeholders — particularly in the legislatures — that universities are responding to external market forces and doing so in a way that also embodies internal market efficiencies.

Elsewhere I’ve called this move replacing the university as a knowledge factory — based on the historical affinities between university curricula and the assembly line (well described by Louis Menand) — to the university as billboard. The university as billboard represents the growing desire to demonstrate to the public that universities are responsive institutions to market forces and have internalized the values of the marketplace. The university as billboard also reassures an anxious public (or at least a certain sector of stakeholders) both that the university is an efficient institution deserving of the continued investment of resources and that public resources will attract outside investment through tuition, grants, and private donor contributions.

Returning to the fate of the NDQ and considering it in this context, I’d contend that there is little room for a public humanities quarterly because it does little to reinforce public view of higher education which expects it to align with their own understanding of market forces shaping public (and private) institutions. If the university is a billboard, then, something like North Dakota Quarterly is a distraction. The priority both internally and externally is to stay on message and on strategy, and if we take the logic of the market to its natural conclusion, the risk of straying from the message is existential.

More Billboard than Factory
I’ve argued in the first two sections of this essay that austerity and neoliberalism have pushed universities to present themselves fiscally and operationally as market driven enterprises. This follows from an assumption that public institutions with state funding become, over time, morally compromised because state funding insulates them from the purifying fire of market competition. As a result, universities have started to privatize core functions in order to demonstrate a willingness to optimize their operations and to promote their operational model as one that rewards competitive, efficient, and socially responsible (at least within a neoliberal model of society that views with a jaundiced eye all state sponsored activities). The efforts to promote the internal working of the university as efficient and competitive creates a situation where the university is more of a billboard for external stakeholders than a factory for knowledge production and education.

On a superficial level, this is not entirely objectionable. After all, creating a compelling billboard for the activities at a university whether through intercollegiate sports, slick marketing material, or a commitment to external relations, celebrates the impact and significance of faculty, students, and staff, builds a sense of community and pride, and attracts resources to university from a range of sources including alumni, prospective students, and legislators. Intercollegiate athletics is, perhaps, the best example of this kind of billboard where the presentation of the product on the field or court, obfuscates the complex processes that allow this product to exist. At the same time, the view of the university as a billboard can spill over into the internal workings of the university as a factory. On the simplest level, a billboard promotes a product rather than a manufacturing process. Because state university receive funding from a range of sources including state legislators, alumni, students, and granting agencies, there is an interest in the process that creates the well-educated student or faculty research. In other words, in higher education billboards needs to represent both, the product, the successful outcome of a university education or faculty work, and, the process, that is the efficiency of the processes that produced these outcomes. In many cases, the process is often easier to evaluate than the product. Within a society increasingly dominated by a kind of neoliberal hegemony, the state-funded university almost always presents a convenient opportunity for rooting out complacency by subjecting individual, programs, and processes to competition and market forces. The university as billboard, then, extends from celebrating the difficult-to-measure success of students and faculty to demonstrating that this success represents the latest in market-hardened educational and research efficiency.

In this context, a public humanities journal like North Dakota Quarterly must have a sustainable business model or be consigned to the ranks of inefficient and complacent university functions best optimized by defunding the project and forcing it to confront fiscal austerity or to engage in the market. A sustainable business model that included state funding were mutually exclusive because the latter created conditions that made the former impossible or at least very unlikely. Successful competition within the crucible of the market represented the only way in which a journal like North Dakota Quarterly could be a successful contribution to the university billboard.

The problem with the university as a billboard is that whatever the advantages of promoting the university are, the message of the billboard too often spills over into the inner workings of the university. While, I’m hesitant to suggest that universities currently function at optimal efficiency —
any complex institution has areas where optimization is possible and desirable and areas where it is not — promoting competition across campus is as likely to produce inefficiencies as to streamline university functions. For example, the long-standing model of higher education as an assembly line requires coordination and collaboration across campus to ensure that each program, department, and class imparts a particular set of concepts, methods, and content. It may be possible to imagine an optimized process where each class contributes the exactly the same energy into the educational process, but such Taylorist fantasies are probably misguided, if not delusional. Students are not uniform blanks when they arrive at the university, previous education, aptitude, and commitment levels vary widely and, whether we will admit it or not, certain subjects have higher threshold levels than others in our current educational environment and require a greater investment of energy from both students and faculty. In other words, the assembly line approach to higher education rewards cooperation among various parts of the process and accepting that some parts of the system are less efficient than others.

As faculty, administrators, and staff internalize the message of the billboard on campus, the spirit of competition is as likely to produce inefficiencies as to streamline processes. Competition for students tends to lead to duplication of marketing and outreach efforts. Funding models that seek to recognize research or teaching excellence or even rein in wasteful competition between programs or departments become systems to be gamed. The long-standing and historical divisions on campus, whether colleges or departments that serve to protect academic and intellectual freedom and distinct disciplinary traditions become barriers to cooperation and collaboration rather than efficient incubators of distinctive methods, practices, and approaches to problems. As a number of recent commentators have noticed (e.g. Hall 2017), by projecting the billboard internally and promoting the appearance of competition, we distill the dynamism and diversity of higher education (or as David Labaree (2017) calls it the “perfect mess”) down to two closely related metrics: dollars and enrollments (which are really just another measure of dollars). As Gary Hall has recently considered in his work on the “uberficiation” of the university, the growing ability to trace precisely the flow of capital — whether its student tuition or faculty labor — has created a system that is pennywise and pound foolish (Hall 2016). Our ability to use dollars and enrollments to recognize efficiencies at the individual and department level has superseded the messier project of attempting to understand the product of the higher education factory whether that be new ideas or high quality students and graduates.

At its worst, the billboard approach to higher education promotes efficiency and competition at the expense of learning and discovery. And, as much as competition evokes long-standing fantasies of the academic meritocracy and satisfies the hegemonic attitudes that equate all waste with indolence and sloth, it rarely corresponds neatly with the actual work of students and faculty at a university. For many stakeholders, however, there is a strong temptation to see the product of the university as factory as only as important as the revenue it can generate. Learning, discovery, education, and knowledge making are difficult to measure. Enrollments and revenue, in contrast, are obvious metrics for accomplishment, but poor surrogates for the ultimate goals of the university.

For others, the promotion of the university as the product of market competition offers both a useful cover and a historical model to justify the expansion of certain programs and the contraction
of others. The disconnect between the external promotion of evident efficiency fortified by competition and the difficulties associated with judging the final product of higher education, student learning and discovery, provides a space for administrators and faculty to advance values closely tied to reinforcing the dominance of the market in wider society. This means articulating the value of higher education in economic terms which tends to be most crudely presented as “workforce development.” Despite persistent efforts to calculate the economic value of a degree in the humanities, in most cases such efforts are incompatible with the goals of a humanities education. Whether this correlates to the efficiency of teaching and research the humanities within the university or even its non-market value to society at large is irrelevant. The billboard that promotes the work of the university to its stakeholders must be made to represent outcomes consistent with the neoliberal expectation that structure the billboard itself.

If efficiencies resulting from competition optimize the structure the university in the age of austerity, then graduates and research at the university should likewise feed this world view as well.

**Conclusion**

In the previous section of this essay, I tried to establish that the university as billboard extends from celebrating the success of students and faculty to demonstrating that this success represents the latest in market-hardened educational and research efficiency. The projection of this message to stakeholders outside the university likely makes sense, particularly in an era of increasingly jaundiced views of the role of the state in the lives of citizens. Unfortunately, projecting the idea of the university as billboard internally at the university has had created challenges. The most obvious is the tendency to promote the easily measured standards of efficiency (i.e. enrollment, income, dollars) at the expense of the more complicated outputs of learning and discovery. After all, knowledge production is messy, and enrollment and income statistics are tidy.

The goals of this change in public higher education are complex and, I’d contend, not fully understood even by its advocates. If we assume that the spread of neoliberal attitudes has more to do with a kind of deep-seated, Gramscian hegemony than a series of compelling arguments (Harvey 2005), then it is hardly surprising to find that assumptions of (in)efficiency drive policy more than any well-defined interest in outcomes. At the same time, the decline in resources of the humanities both on UND’s campus and national and the defunding of long-standing projects like *North Dakota Quarterly* represent more than just public relations gambits designed to make higher education look lean and market-savvy.

The humanities have always served an important role in developing the leadership class in the United States, and as a result, elites have always sought ways of negotiating access to humanities education. During periods of economic growth and social and political change like the late 1960s, humanities education expanded to train a new generation of leaders in a tumultuous time. After a decline in the 1970s, the number of humanities majors tended to stabilize at around 10% despite some fluctuations and the continued expansion of higher education. Without dwelling too long on the numbers, throughout the 20th century, the study the humanities has long stood as one of the ways for individuals to enter the leadership class in the U.S. and as higher education has expanded,
especially in the second-half to the 20th century, access to an education in the humanities expanded as well. Efforts to limit access to a humanities education manifests itself in the competition between universities and colleges as historically elite schools have tended to support broadly liberal arts curriculum as a hallmark of their elite status. At the same time, schools looking to ascend the rankings have had to balance the desire to imitate the schools at the top of the higher education pyramid with the need to cultivate stakeholders through billboard-style claims to their efficiency and immediate economic benefit to their communities and students (Labaree 2017). As a result, at places like the University of North Dakota, there has been a push-pull of support for the humanities as both a key aspect of democratic higher education and a wasteful extravagance best left to more well-heeled universities designed to produce the next generation of elite leaders. This debate between the need for a robust and expansive humanities education at UND and the need to focus on workforce development and immediate local needs has existed since the early days of the university (Geiger 1958). The current version of this debate grounded in neoliberal attitudes toward the function of the state and the goal of education, however, has transformed the conversation. If throughout most of the 20th century, a liberal arts education with a strong emphasis on the humanities was a hallmark of the leadership class, in the 21st century, the political elite have come to question this very formula. Talk of preparing leaders while endorsing approaches to higher education that shift resources from the humanities to other fields, suggests a significant change in priorities.

More importantly and nefarious, this shift in the basic expectations for the functioning of higher education presupposes an outcome. As the de-emphasis on the humanities has served to limit access to the leadership class by shifting resources elsewhere under the guise of efficiency and competition, it has also served to reify the existing social order as the product of similar forces. In other words, by privileging competition in the present, the current leadership presents disciplinary priorities and even the larger social order as the outcome of similar competition and similar ground rules. Part of the hegemonic character of neoliberalism is that it presents itself as a historical reality rather than a set of constructed expectation in the present.

Whatever the longterm goals for higher education, the billboard constructed by current leadership is not only an argument for how much more efficient a university can become, but also for their own position of authority. Diminishing the role of the humanities, then, becomes not just a result of future policies and practice, but also the natural result of past competition which has forged the current leadership as well as their ideas. While this might represent a descent through this essay into position of pure cynicism, the consistency of the rhetoric both on campus and in the larger public sphere hints otherwise. The ultimate goal of neoliberal attitudes is not to make the public sphere more efficient, but to fortify the position of private capital in society.