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Faculty and student engagement in the Argentine grassroots rebellion: toward a democratic and emancipatory vision of the university

Jenée Slocum · Robert A. Rhoads

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Abstract Following Argentina's economic collapse of December 2001, the authors examine the engagement of university faculty and students in various grassroots movements. Based on a qualitative study involving 24 formal structured interviews, 18 informal interviews, observation-based field work, and document analysis, the authors identify key forms of faculty and student engagement as well as the manner in which individuals discussed the relationship between universities and society. Findings are used to advance the idea of a more democratic and emancipatory vision of the contemporary university and build on the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Throughout the article, the authors ground their discussion in international/comparative literature addressing globalization, neoliberalism, university reform, and social movements.

Keywords University reform · Social movements · Faculty and student engagement · Neoliberalism · Globalization · Latin American universities

Introduction

Buenos Aires is a sensory overload. As one of the largest cities in South America, with more than a third of Argentina's thirty million people living within the Greater Buenos Aires area, it is a city of immense activity. The residents or *Porteños* of Buenos Aires bustle throughout the streets day and night. Indeed, as a visitor one is hard pressed to determine when the residents of this great city actually sleep. Smoke-filled cafés are packed until the wee hours of the night with locals and cosmopolitans chatting about politics, recent and notable uprisings, and international affairs. In the daylight, the grandeur of the city's noted European-inspired architecture is striking, but so are the daily protests and politically motivated graffiti covering surfaces ranging from governmental buildings and statues of Argentine patriots to banks, streets, and sidewalks. In the aftermath of the

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December 2001 economic collapse, the graffiti messages were fairly consistent: “*Throw the bums out!*” “*Thieves!*” “*Criminals!*” “*Resign Now!*” “*Down with corruption!*” The targets of the people’s wrath were the nation’s political leaders and policy makers at the International Monetary Fund (IMF), or “masters of the universe,” as Chomsky (2006) has facetiously described them.

What brought us to Buenos Aires on three separate occasions between 2002 and 2005 was an interest in the ways in which Argentine faculty and students were involved in the nation’s “grassroots rebellion,” as it has been described by Burbach (2002), among others. We were curious about what such forms of engagement might suggest for how to think about the role of the modern university in society. Universities are many things to many people, and certainly there are conflicting ideas about what role they are meant to play within Argentine society. Of course, the fact that conflict exists is not too surprising, given that education in general is recognized as a site of political, social, and ideological struggle (Apple 1996; Freire 1970, 1998; Giroux 1983, 2002; McLaren 1995; Torres 1998; Torres and Rhoads 2006). Certainly, universities in Latin America are not immune to such conflict (Mollis 2001; Ordorika 2003; Rhoads and Mina 2001). In fact, the societal role of the modern Latin American university as an autonomous and democratic entity ideally allows for the existence of contradictory and conflicting ideologies (Albornoz 1993). And although university autonomy is highly valued by many, the modern Latin American university also is understood as a space for the development of ideas and forms of knowledge meant to serve the greater good (Schugurensky 2006). Recently, especially in other parts of the world, including Australia, Europe, Japan, and the United States, there is an increasingly powerful vision of the university that challenges the public-good model of the Latin American university (Mollis 2001, 2006; Ordorika and Pusser 2007; Pusser 2002, in press). This is the vision of the university as a tool for global economic development, a vision shaped to a great extent by the growing strength of neoliberalism (Marginson 2004; Marginson and Considine 2000; Newson and Buchbinder 1988; Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004).

A concern we have about the growing dominance of the neoliberal vision is that university activities associated with such a perspective often are described as forms of economic development beneficial to everyone. Hence, the neoliberal vision of the university, which is quite consistent with contemporary forms of Reaganism and Thatcherism (Apple 2000), simply gets positioned as one more version of the “social good”—an economic version. A discourse of economic rationality frames such discussions, as the neoliberal university becomes the natural outcome of evolutionary processes operating in an increasingly global capitalist environment. As the outcome of economic and organizational Darwinism, the neoliberal model generally is positioned as apolitical and non-ideological. Alternatively, any opposition to such a model is quickly defined as politically motivated and ideologically driven. But in this article we take issue with this line of thought and seek instead to shed light on the actions of Argentine faculty and students involved in social movements aimed at challenging neoliberalism. We use such an analysis to raise fundamental questions about the democratic role of today’s universities in an increasingly complex and global environment; we are especially interested in how Argentine faculty and students participating in oppositional movements envision the role of the modern university in society. Drawing largely from the theoretical work of Santos (2006), and based on our interviews and observations of faculty and students engaged in anti-neoliberal struggle, our goal is to offer a vision of a more democratic and emancipatory university.

Globalization, neoliberalism, and the contemporary university

Globalization may be understood as the intensification of world relations in economics, culture, and politics made possible in large part by improvements in communications and transportation since the 1970s (Burbules and Torres 2000; Giddens 1990; Held 1990). Processes associated with globalization are “seen as blurring national boundaries, shifting solidarities within and between nation-states, and deeply affecting the constitutions of national and interest-group identities” (Torres and Schugurensky 2002, p. 430). International development organizations, such as the IMF and the World Bank, created following the Bretton Woods agreement in 1944, play a key role in shaping globalization in a manner consistent with neoliberalism (Stiglitz 2002). The IMF and World Bank have facilitated the reach of neoliberal globalization through loan projects and policy recommendations—often in the form of demanding “conditionalities”—made to developing and transitioning nations. Conditionalities, attached as part of “structural adjustment programs” aimed at altering fundamental structures within the developing world, tend to be unilateral and of the one-size-fits-all variety. And, these conditionalities, or adjustments, are then implemented as requirements in order to receive loans. Of course, the interests of global governing organizations are not limited to the economic sphere, as projects and conditionalities also impact political and cultural spheres as well. Interventions by the IMF and World Bank quite often work to erode the strength of national governments and their ability to act in the interests of their own citizens (Stiglitz 2002). Such anti-democratic practices, combined with the tendency to ignore or devalue social, cultural, and political differences across nations, contributed as much as anything to the economic calamity in Argentina.

Neoliberalism stresses the relevance of the market as a catalyst for national economic development (Aviles 1997), and discourages governmental interference in the so-called “natural” economic progression that results from submitting state economies to “market fundamentalism” or laissez-fair market policies (Stiglitz 2002, p. 36). State policies guided by neoliberalism promote the opening of markets, privatizing state-owned enterprises, reducing protectionism, dismantling public services and social programs, and reducing support for education—particularly higher education (Apple 2000; Harvey 2005; Paley 2001; Taylor 1999). Discussions of the public good become focused more on economics and efficiency and less on advancing the ideals of democratic participation and community engagement (Wolin 1981). Neoliberal philosophy applied to the developing world hinges on the idea that the privatization of public goods will free up funds for the payment of national debt and future economic investment in capital enterprises (Stiglitz 2002).

Consistent with a neoliberal vision, higher education often is considered a private good or commodity to be purchased in a free market; consequently, students should be financially responsible for attending universities and the state should direct funds otherwise earmarked for universities to other priorities (Collins and Rhoads, in press; Santos 2006). Neoliberalism directly shapes the nature of the relationship between the university and society by placing great emphasis on the generation of capital and by advancing a vision of a weak state, at least relative to its role in supporting higher education. As funds are withdrawn from higher education, the resulting financial crisis prompts universities to seek new funding sources primarily through charging user-fees and forming partnerships with business and industry, thus further shifting the costs of education from the state to students and collapsing the division between knowledge and commodity (Santos 2006). Within this environment, described by Slaughter and Leslie (1997) as “academic capitalism,” and then later by Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) as the “academic capitalist knowledge regime,” university activities contributing to economic growth and development are perceived as enhancing both

the financial viability of the university as well as the economic sustainability of local, regional, and/or national communities. The reformulation of public goods as well as the impetus to align educational aims with those of the market and global capitalism allow for the rationalization of university efforts for purely economic ends as a suitable and desirable form of university service and extension. Neoliberal alignment of educational aims is also seen in changes to evaluation and accreditation processes, where increasingly a narrow cost-benefit analysis favoring the commercialization of the university further threatens autonomy. Many faculty and students also aid the expansion of the neoliberal university through a variety of academic endeavors and generally view their efforts as politically and ideologically neutral.

The neoliberal model essentially situates the university as a tool or engine for economic development. This view stresses two primary contributions to be made by universities to local, regional, and national economies: (1) the development of students from a human capital standpoint (students as prospective workers, managers, and entrepreneurs), and (2) the development of science and technology in a manner consistent with an information knowledge-based economy (Newson and Buchbinder 1988; Schugurensky 2006). The university as “economic tool” contrasts with the more traditional model of the university as “academic haven,” wherein the university stands above the society serving as a cultural guardian of all that is righteous (Newson and Buchbinder 1988). The university as academic haven, as Schugurensky (2006) argued, is contingent on it being protected from four primary corrosive forces: the pursuit of utilitarian aims, the politicization of knowledge, massification, and low academic standards. In other words, the university as academic haven must stand apart from society and the masses and be above the fray of politics and ideology. Images of the university as an “ivory tower,” or “city on the hill,” offering light in the form of guidance and direction for the broader society, come to mind here.

Both of the aforementioned visions of the modern university—the university as “economic tool” and as “academic haven”—are problematic when one considers the university and its relationship to society from a more critical perspective. Indeed, we intend to examine the engagement of University of Buenos Aires (UBA) faculty and students in Argentina’s grassroots rebellion to highlight the shortcomings of such views, while in turn offering a counter perspective of the university as agent of social transformation. We do not suggest that the perspectives of our research participants represent the entire range of views at UBA nor do we claim that UBA represents a model of the socially transformative university. Rather, our aim is to highlight the actions, thoughts, and visions of individual actors who imagine and work to create a more emancipatory and inclusive university through engagement in such movements. The vision of the university we explore has its roots in Latin America, as well as other parts of the world, including the United States, and was especially prominent in the 1960s and early 1970s (Schugurensky 2006). The university as a socially transformative agent suggests that it is embedded in the society (as opposed to standing above or outside of the society), is concerned with active engagement in social problems (as opposed to claiming a position of neutrality), and addresses a democratically negotiated social good (as opposed to serving the highest bidder). To better understand the vision of the university we seek to advance, it is helpful to discuss the role that social movements and social movement theory play in today’s world.

Globalization from below and social movement theory

The impact of neoliberal globalization on the socio-political environment and on education differs by location. In the case of Argentina, much of the social strife in recent years has

been linked to the economic impositions of the nation's political leaders and the neoliberal agenda of the IMF. The large-scale protests that occurred in the streets of Buenos Aires in December of 2001 and subsequently were prompted by an economic collapse that resulted in the freezing of individual savings accounts, the conversion of dollars to pesos, and reports in the press that armored trucks had carted off some US\$26 billion for safe keeping (Hopkins 2002). Thousands of *Porteños* took to the streets banging on pots and pans in protests known as *cacerolazos*, intended to signify their inability to pay for necessities like food and utilities (Burbach 2002).

What came to be called a “grassroots rebellion” was in fact many rebellions, representing diverse social movements and ideological positions that at times appeared to blend together. Their most visible manifestation became the massive street protests, which some argue were not entirely spontaneous, but created through political patronage networks (Malamud 2006; Auyero 2006). These protests culminated in the resignation of the president followed by a succession of five replacements. Discontent with political and economic leaders also fueled the *piquetero* movement (movements associated with unemployed workers) of the 1990s that grew dramatically in size and scope following the December collapse (Trigona 2002, 2005). Beyond the impressive size of the uprisings, they also included a large scope of Argentine society for various and complex reasons. For example, Auyero (2006) examined the “gray area” of store lootings that took place in Buenos Aires and other locations in terms of connections among networks of looters, political representatives, and police, in an effort to demonstrate that the lines of demarcation were not always clearly defined—such as when police became looters. Others, such as Malamud (2006), questioned the spontaneity of a portion of the 2001 uprisings, pointing to possible incitement of support networks by various district leaders. Malamud proposed that some lootings were motivated by the desire of certain political parties to weaken the presidency and induce resignation. Essentially, both Auyero and Malamud pointed to the complexity of motivations that led to collective action and the uprising, while demonstrating the intricacies of the events of 2001. Regardless of motivation, the strength of the rebellion indicated pressure within the country for change.

Frustration felt by the people of Argentina had in fact emerged to a significant extent during the mid- and late-1990s, when structural adjustment policies were first implemented in Argentina. As opposition grew so did the involvement of UBA faculty and students; many of these individuals saw neoliberalism and its vision of the university as opposing the Cordoba Movement of 1918, wherein the university was defined as a vehicle for social transformation and concerned with equalizing educational opportunities, promoting social justice, and conducting socially relevant research (Schugurensky 2006; Walter 1969). Within this vision, universities are expected to maintain autonomy from the state, provide a space for free and sometimes controversial thought, as well as make university education accessible to the masses through the provision of free or nearly free higher education (Albornoz 1993).

The Argentine grassroots rebellion highlights the power of social movements to challenge neoliberalism and calls to mind another version of globalization—globalization from below (Kellner 2000). In contrast to globalization from above—that is, the power of international financial institutions (e.g., IMF) and intergovernmental organizations (e.g., WTO), to shape world relations in the interests of global capital and economic elites—globalization from below is “manifested in individuals, institutions, and social movements that are actively opposed to what is perceived as corporate globalization” (Torres and Rhoads 2006, p. 8). Globalization from below represents the power of the people to organize collective struggle and challenge dominant power structures through social movements.

For the groups and individuals who oppose neoliberalism, they see reliance upon the market as a harsh and inhumane mechanism for determining the social and economic realities of peoples' lives (Rhoads 2003). Furthermore, they are troubled by the power of multilateral organizations and corporations to influence global economic affairs. The use of collective action to challenge national and transnational structures and economic policies influenced by the neoliberal project is a prevalent mechanism employed to “promote some type of change in power” and in “cultural actions, ethical values, science, or production” (Ocadiz et al. 1998, p. 42). Oppositional movements as key vehicles for social change and for challenging the structures of an interconnected global network have increasingly come to the attention of leading social theorists around the world (Castells 1997; Escobar 1992; Perrons 2004; Touraine 1988).

Perrons (2004) argued that struggle and conflict are inherent in social life; therefore, in dynamic societies where the many are denied the right of involvement in decisions affecting their daily lives by the few, methods for correcting the imbalance will emerge. Social movements are one such method. For Escobar (1992), social movements “link together economic, social and political problematics within an overarching cultural field” (p. 41). He argued that, “the crisis of global capital and globalizing narratives—especially that of development—have intensified debate on culture and society in Latin America perhaps more than elsewhere” (p. 41), and that social movements serve a symbolic function in the sense that they announce to the world that there is a problem severe enough to amalgamate individuals into a collective unit. Similarly, Castells (1997) asserted that social movements are potential social innovators providing “new codes under which societies may be re-thought and re-established” in a time when the neoliberal project aims to divorce the social sphere from the global economy (p. 360). Finally, Touraine (1988) posited that, “we are entering into a new mode of production [a postindustrial society], which by giving rise to new conflicts, will give birth to new social movements” (p. 74); thus, as the world continues to change around us, so too does the way that we navigate, make sense, and seek to affect our world. Such a brave new world gives rise to new social movements such as those seen in Argentina.

With the aforementioned in mind, this paper examines the context of faculty and student opposition to neoliberalism through their engagement in various social movements and related activities. Specifically, the study highlights the work of faculty and students at the University of Buenos Aires who collaborated with community organizations and social movements that arose and gathered strength during and after the economic collapse of December 2001. Key research questions include the following: (1) In what ways do faculty and students support various anti-neoliberal social movements? (2) How do faculty and students describe their engagement? (3) What connections do faculty and students make between their academic lives and their engagement in oppositional movements? and (4) How does their involvement in various oppositional movements relate to their vision of the contemporary university and its role in society?

Setting the context

Argentina provides a relevant environment for exploring the role and responsibility of the university to society, because the notion of a university solely devoted to supporting economic gain is the antithesis of the philosophy advanced by the Cordoba Movement of 1918. In the early 20th century, students at the University of Cordoba, reacting to the perceived elitism and chaotic nature of the university system, issued a manifesto calling for

university autonomy and the creation of a system of co-governance (Waggoner 1966). This movement led to the popular belief that the university should deal with national problems as well as focus on the development of new ideas relevant to its surroundings (Schugurensky 2006; Walter 1969). Moreover, the university should be governed by transparent and inclusive processes and be open to all who wish to gain access (Walter 1969). The Cordoba Movement also “proposed a reduction in the gulf between mental and manual work (and thereby the stratified social relations that derive from the division of labor) and an integration of theoretical and practical knowledge” (Schugurensky 2006, p. 304). The reforms resulting from the Cordoba student movement influenced universities throughout Latin America and to this day continue to shape how the university is strategically and pragmatically constructed in Argentina.

We conceptualize our study as an analysis of faculty and student engagement in the Argentine grassroots rebellion. But since all of our research participants come from the University of Buenos Aires,¹ it may be helpful to provide some context about their university. We want to stress however that our project is not a case study of UBA, but an analysis of a particular group of UBA faculty and students. Furthermore, in pointing toward a more democratic and socially transformative vision of the university, we do not mean to imply that UBA is the model for such a vision. We simply intend to learn from the experiences of UBA faculty and students engaged in anti-neoliberal movements.

Founded in 1821, UBA consists of thirteen college divisions and in terms of student enrollment may be the largest university in the world, rivaled only by the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City. According to the 2004 student and faculty census, UBA includes 294,000 undergraduate students, 13,500 graduate students, and approximately 25,000 faculty members and instructors (UBA Census 2004). There have been numerous efforts to reform UBA over the years in order to reduce its size. However, given the social contract existing in Argentina, in which the nation is to provide citizens with the opportunity to attend a university if they are able, any attempt to shrink UBA has been vehemently opposed (Marquis 2003). Indeed, considering the size and complexity of UBA, it is fairly easy to comprehend the diversity of experiences, opinions, political alliances, and ideological conflicts that exist within the institution.

An important feature of UBA salient to this study is the fact that it is geographically disbursed throughout the city and that students and faculty often experience their university as part-timers: approximately 40% of the student body and 85% of the faculty are part-time (Marquis 2003). Also worth noting is the fact that almost 25% of the faculty work without remuneration of any kind and many of the rest are significantly underpaid and rely on other jobs to support themselves (Marquis 2003). In fact, one professor with whom we spoke described the phenomenon of the “taxi cab professor” at UBA, given that so many of them must shuffle back and forth between different jobs just to make ends meet. Many continue to teach out of a form of “missionary zeal” and the prestige of being affiliated with the nation’s best-known university. It is also salient to note that both faculty and students are represented by numerous unions, some of which are actively involved in political matters concerning UBA, including organizing resistance against governmental efforts to reduce university funding as part of IMF structural adjustment programs. This latter point calls

¹ When our comments concern the University of Buenos Aires we specifically use either “UBA” or “University of Buenos Aires.” When we speak of universities in general, as in the idea or concept of the university, we use “the university.” We need to be clear here as this article is not intended to focus on UBA per se, but on views that a group of UBA faculty and students have of the contemporary university in general.

attention to the fact that UBA faculty and students have a history of political engagement in important local and national affairs.

Qualitative methods

The purpose of our study was to better understand the nature and context of Argentine faculty and student involvement in supporting anti-neoliberal social movements and how such knowledge might inform a vision of the modern university and emancipatory forms of engagement with society. Given the open-ended nature of our inquiry, qualitative methods were particularly helpful in that they allow for exploration into the meaning making of study participants (Bogdan and Biklen 1998; Maxwell 1996). Additionally, our use of a narrative-oriented approach was informed by the tradition of critical social science in that we sought to contribute to a more democratic vision of the modern university. Critical social scientists tend to focus on the underlying structures, processes, and social-arrangements that reproduce forms of social inequality and marginality (Fay 1987; Tierney and Rhoads 1993). Consequently, in studying Argentine faculty and students and their engagement in oppositional movements, it was paramount for us to understand how they relate to the social world around them, how they perceive their position within it, and how they see their actions influencing social struggle and the role of the Argentine university. Doing so required an understanding of the historic relationship of universities to society in Argentina as well as competing ideologies seeking to advance particular notions of the contemporary university. Engaging in meaningful dialogue with knowledgeable informants was one way of addressing such matters.

Both researchers involved in this study made extended trips to Buenos Aires in 2002, 2003, and 2005. During these trips, which ranged in duration from 1 week to 2 months, we conducted formal and informal interviews, collected media items such as newspapers, brochures, and fliers, attended relevant lectures and activities, and observed rallies, marches, and artifacts (e.g., graffiti on various structures around the city). Rich field notes were kept at all observational events and gatherings. Thus, documents, field notes, transcripts from formal interviews, and hand notes from informal interviews form the corpus of data for this study.

In order to gain an initial understanding of the context, we explored various media sources and articles focused on the Argentine rebellion. This exploration also produced the names of about a dozen key UBA faculty and students who participated in various social movements and who might be willing to participate in formal structured interviews. By interviewing several faculty and students identified in various media reports, we also were able to obtain the names and contact information of additional research participants, including several community organizers and a handful of academic administrators. Members of the latter two groups were interviewed so as to gain additional insight into various social movements taking place in and around Buenos Aires and to gather perceptions about the role of university personnel in supporting such activities. Thus, our technique for selecting research participants involved both purposeful and snowball sampling and is consistent with common practices recommended for narrative-oriented inquiry (Bogdan and Biklen 1998; Maxwell 1996).

Overall, we conducted 24 formal interviews and 18 informal interviews. The formal structured interviews include 10 professors, 5 students, 6 community organizers, and 3 senior administrators. The faculty members interviewed for this study come from a wide range of academic backgrounds including engineering, law, economics, political economy,

sociology, humanities, philosophy, and education. The students interviewed for the study are from sociology, education, and philosophy. The formal interviews were conducted in both Spanish and English (roughly half in each language), tape recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis involved both deductive and inductive processes. Using the research questions as a guide, certain themes emerged from the body of data, including two central themes relating to how particular UBA faculty and students supported social movements as well as the ways in which they linked the university to social concerns; thus, two key data categories serve to organize our discussion of findings: (1) “forms of engagement” and (2) “linking the university to social concerns.” Although these two general themes reflect a more deductive analysis, the sub-themes within these broader categories derived more or less from our read of the data and represent a form of inductive analysis. For example, sub-themes within the general category of “forms of engagement” include discussions related to participation in the *cacerolazos* as well as involvement in a grassroots movement to recuperate businesses. Likewise, within the broad category of “linking the university to social concerns” are sub-themes related to building more egalitarian relationships between the university and the community and recognizing the privilege and social responsibility that comes with being a professor or student at a renowned university.

Forms of engagement

There are many ways that participating faculty and students involved themselves in supporting the grassroots movements in Argentina. Students especially were key to some of the protests and demonstrations in the streets of Buenos Aires, but they also participated in ongoing movements and organizations aimed at reconstituting Argentine society. At the heart of these movements was (and continues to be) resistance to a form of society defined by powerful economic elites interested in advancing a neoliberal vision of the world and global relations. A key for many faculty and students was to advance an alternative model of globalization. As Celía Rodríguez,² a doctoral student in philosophy and letters, explained, “If we understand globalization as imperialism, then we are anti-globalizers. If we think that in order for many of these movements or for some part of these movements to arise, then they must connect with other international movements and form a part of an alternative globalization.” Relatedly, Raúl García, a professor of social science at UBA, spoke of different levels of consciousness that arose in Argentina and that enabled movements to gain strength: “I think there are different levels of consciousness. I think that there are people that have greater consciousness than others, but that all the people involved in the movements, at this moment in history, have a consciousness that it doesn’t work. They want it to change. I mean I think that they have an important role to play.” Professor García went on to suggest that the struggle against neoliberal globalization is really not a new thing, but is essentially a struggle against “a continuation of imperialism.”

The most basic form of engagement in various grassroots struggles was simply taking to the streets with other Argentine citizens. Mabel López, a graduate student specializing in economic and social development, discussed her involvement in this basic but important act: “I participated a lot in protests in 2001 and even before 2001. Over here we have a tradition. Every March 24th we take to the streets to remember the coup d’état of 1976... We commemorate this date and we embody this manifestation that perhaps is the most

² All names of faculty and students are pseudonyms.

important one that Argentina has.” López specifically discussed her participation in December of 2001 and its significance: “During 2001, I did indeed participate in what was the social protest involving the fall of the streets on December 19th. I went out to the streets and I found myself with many people. I went to protest and I found myself with my neighbors. I participated in the *cacerolazos*. I took to the streets with my own frying pan.”

Other students and faculty also spoke of their involvement in the *cacerolazos* and the powerful sense of unity that formed among many Argentine citizens. Cristian Gómez, a professor of law, explained it this way: “In 2001 there was a confluence of union members and strikers. It was a moment full of energy, where union members joined with the picketers. There was a famous song sung in the streets that talked about ‘*Piquete, cacerola, la lucha es una sola*’—‘Picket, frying pan, the fight is one and the same.’” And Professor García also captured elements of the comradeship evident in the streets: “I am involved in a leftist party and also the Workers Socialist Party... It’s a Trotskyist organization. And as a part of this militant organization, I anticipated a range of political manifestations and everything in-between. Then, on the 19th of December, the night when we occupied the city, we were all neighbors, together in the streets. All of Buenos Aires was a party.”

Another common form of engagement involved assisting with the recuperated businesses movement (also described as “recuperated factory movement”). Marta Pérez, a professor of philosophy and letters, spoke of her past and present involvement with recuperated businesses and other community organizations such as soup kitchens: “One of the things that we do with factory workers is helping them to discover how to self-organize. They have been workers for generations, and then all of a sudden they were on their own. The university can help by providing them with some of its social capital.” Pérez went on to note other ways in which faculty members helped the workers’ movement: “We have a rather large project focused on knowledge transference. It includes the faculty of engineering, sciences, social work, and humanities. We have a project working with the workers of recovered businesses, teaching them organizational skills, but also teaching them how to keep their factories running.”

Faculty and students in this study tended to believe that they could make a difference and that social movements held the potential of advancing the concerns of workers. As Professor Cristian Gómez explained, “I think you can say that a people united can change politics and the economy. They can change as much globally as they can at the city or local level. For example, globalization affects all of us through the work force. I believe that workers united, working together, can indeed block processes that might threaten their work, like the shrinking of the job market and diminishing salaries. Individuals cannot do anything, but they have to have an awareness of what affects them. The people with awareness who do nothing will explode. They have to recognize that they have the power to change their situation, to change their whole lives. They can fight.” And Ivan González, the president of a powerful student organization, was quite optimistic about the potential of workers, students, and “everyday people” changing society: “Yeah, I think they can change it. And not only can they change it, but they can rule their society. They make the society everyday. The workers, the students, the peasants, they can rule. They make change everyday. The economy of our society is made from all we have and do. Our clothes, our food, they are all made by the workers, the working class.”

Another key issue that got many students and faculty engaged in oppositional struggle concerned the Higher Education Law and efforts to overturn it. Student leader Ivan González elaborated: “The Higher Education Law was important. It was highly questioned by the students. We wanted to reverse the neoliberal forms of higher education that were being advanced. This implies that among other things the universities could regain some of

the autonomy that they had lost.” Professor Gómez also spoke to these concerns: “In the ‘90’s the entire educational arena was changed at the high school level by the Federal Education Law and at the university level by the Higher Education Law. There were enormous protests, marches, and rallies against this law.” Mabel López (a graduate student), had participated as an undergraduate in such protests: “When I was a student at UBA, I participated in university marches concerning the Higher Education Law. Mainly because there wouldn’t be much of a budget for higher education anymore.”

The Higher Education Law of 1995 was part of the broader privatization push aimed at shifting the role of the Argentine state from one of “provider and subsidizer,” as Mollis (2003) argued, to one of “regulator.” This was in part accomplished through the creation of CONEAU, the National Council for University Accreditation and Evaluation, combined with various efforts to increasingly shift the role of universities from that of service to the broader society to service to the labor market and economic competitiveness. Mollis (2003) elaborated, “This new ‘common sense’ acknowledges the social value of higher education—but primarily for its role in meeting labor market demands and enhancing national competitiveness. The traditional knowledge-based responsibilities of universities—such as research, teaching, and community service—have increasingly been located within the demands of the labor market.” She went on to point out that, as part of the accountability movement (which is linked to the privatization trend and neoliberalism in general), both public and private universities must collect data from their graduates regarding their earnings. The outcome of this assessment process is that, “Universities are considered to be successful to the extent to which their graduates’ earn high salaries.” Mollis (2002) described this broad shift as a movement “away from the idea of the university as a social institution toward the idea of higher education as an ‘industry.’” In light of these trends within the broad landscape of the nation’s higher education system, the efforts of some faculty and students to support various grassroots movements thus run contrary to the “university as industry” model critiqued by Mollis. Given the form of university advanced by the Higher Education Law of 1995, it is fairly easy to see why faculty and students who were most likely to oppose neoliberalism also might be involved in opposition to the Law. Clearly, these individuals value the university as a “social institution” and see their engagement with oppositional movements as an appropriate way of applying what they have studied and learned over the years.

A fourth form of oppositional engagement was more directly tied to the intellectual life of professors and students. For example, Mabel López spoke of her involvement in organizing a conference on globalization: “April of 2002, or thereabouts, is when I started to participate in the organization of the first Global Social Forum in Argentina. In the Porto Alegre meeting of that same year it was proposed and decided to have a thematic forum in Argentina, given that there had been the economic disaster here. So, I participated in the development of that forum and from there it turned into a global event. There was a global protest with all the renowned icons of the movement against the IMF and the other multilateral organizations, the WTO, World Bank, etc... It had other themes tied in with globalization, having to do with gender, agriculture, food supplies, and the environment... At that moment in history there were connections being made with everything that has to do with people and organizations that work globally.”

The academics we interviewed take seriously their intellectual contributions to the struggle against neoliberalism and its deleterious effects on Argentina. These individuals tend to believe that while actions are critical to the success of oppositional movements, they also recognize that ideas matter too. They believe that the work of intellectuals at universities has played a key role in the fight against neoliberal domination. For example,

one professor addressed the contribution of Argentine and Latin American scholars to the anti-neoliberalism movement: “On the whole, I would say that we have a pretty good staff of people in the humanities, people who write a lot, write books, publish in America, Europe, and also, of course, Argentina. Their contributions to the globalization debate are relevant. I wouldn’t say that it is the most important thing, but these people are doing serious work in their fields, in social science, political science, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, literature.”

In discussions with faculty and students, it was clear that many valued the opportunity to connect their intellectual work to social change efforts. Along these lines, Celfa Rodríguez (a doctoral student) discussed her engagement in various intellectual activities: “We organized a congress 2 years ago where we brought together experiences from 20 universities from all over the country... And we are publishing a book about the activities that the university is doing for society.” Rodríguez went on to discuss the place of academic work, suggesting that getting individuals and groups together at conferences or assemblies is foundational to organizing ideas and joint forms of resistance: “We reflected and created theory in order to better understand and to more effectively transform our reality.”

Marta Pérez spoke of the opportunity and responsibility that UBA faculty and students have for linking the struggles of Argentina to larger issues and ideas tied to globalization. She pointed out that many workers lack the opportunity to forge such links: “I don’t think globalization comes into their thoughts. They are preoccupied more with their daily lives. Anti-globalization movements are a luxury of the university students, although not all of the university students. Mainly the middle class... I think that the most important thing to recognize is that we are free to do it. We have the possibility to do it. I can devote part of my research to this.” Pérez went on to argue that this ought to be part of the function of the university: “There is an obligation of the university. I’m not asking whether or not we make a difference. That is a very difficult question to answer. But then I begin to think that in general we do make a difference. Anything makes a difference.” Ivan González (a student leader) echoed Pérez’s thoughts: “This sector has the privilege to think and have an intellectual relationship. We have an ethical responsibility to the people, to bring all the students and professors together to help with the challenges in our society.”

The forms of engagement discussed in this section tend to suggest a particular vision of the university—one that sees the need to connect intellectual life and academic knowledge to social change efforts. Indeed, many faculty and students alluded to a vision of a more transformative university, one committed to addressing the social and economic needs of broad segments of the society, as opposed to being bound by the concerns of an elite class of powerful decision makers. Thus, in what follows we devote greater attention to views about the university in general and its obligation to society.

Linking the university to social concerns

A key theme emerging from discussions with faculty and students was a strong belief in the need to embed the university in society for the purpose of addressing social needs. For example, María Torres, a student in philosophy and letters, discussed a course she took that focused on social movements. Torres was particularly enthused about the ways in which the professor linked the course to investigations of actual movements in Buenos Aires, and how such a praxis-oriented strategy enabled the students to contribute in meaningful ways. She spoke passionately about the need for strong ties between the university and society. Torres chose to focus on the relationship between universities and recuperated businesses,

because she believes universities have a lot to offer such organizations. She also chose to work in this sector because she saw recuperated businesses, wherein the workers actually run the company, as a more egalitarian way of functioning in a capitalistic world.

Roberto Silva, another student in the school of philosophy and letters, addressed a key issue that occasionally was missing from the conversation about university-community ties—building a more egalitarian relationship between the university and the community. He argued that the university should not be positioned as the “keeper of knowledge,” in the sense of Freire’s (1970) critique of education, and that the community should be seen as something more than a passive “recipient.” Silva explained, “There is the need to think of these relationships as something other than the banking concept of the university... So this work surrounds itself in the matter of how to think about a more horizontal relationship, one that breaks the barriers between society and the typical university.” He explained that because of the success of some initial partnerships, which were grounded in egalitarianism, new collaborations have emerged and the university’s engagement has surged as a consequence. There has been much success, but as Silva noted, “the connection cannot be vertical.” He concluded that a space within the university must exist to serve the society; the university must be free to reach out to “the people, social organizations, the popular sectors, those that don’t have easy access to education.” At least one professor pointed out that the kind of egalitarian relationships suggested by Silva may occur more naturally within the Argentine context, given that the nation’s professors do not for the most part constitute a paid professional class and may see themselves as more connected to workers and the plight of the working class. This professor argued that the poor working conditions of faculty in Argentina make building less hierarchical ties to workers much easier. But he also concluded that the many disadvantages of universities relying so much on part-time faculty far outweigh any advantages, and that in the end service to the society suffers from lack of a full-time academic workforce. Also, because so many faculty members are part-time, the influence of these individuals on departmental and institutional decisions and issues is diminished.

Like Silva, many students and faculty involved in grassroots organizing took seriously the idea and practice of enacting more egalitarian pedagogical relations with communities of workers and activists. A professor of social science, Carlos Valle, spoke of organizing investigative projects with factory workers as a means of enhancing their bottom line and increasing the likelihood of the factory’s survival. Some of these investigative projects led to the development and implementation of academic conferences, and on at least one occasion a major sociological conference was hosted by a recuperated business.

Many of the individuals interviewed spoke passionately about the need to maintain the university’s autonomy, in terms of governance, so that faculty and students could be free to engage the society. As Professor Pérez explained, “The most important thing is that we are free to do it. We have the possibility to do it. I can devote part of my research to this.” And Celía Rodríguez echoed these sentiments, arguing that the university must be free to use its intellectual resources to provide support and direction for the larger society: it should offer “critical analysis and think up alternatives. This is the duty of the university.” She went on to add, “Presently, the students are working hand in hand [within society]. This is also important. But I also think that fundamentally the university has to say something, something with respect to what has happened, about what is happening, and about what should happen. The university should make some type of contribution in this area.” Roberto Silva (a student) added, “The university has to be financed through the state and it has to be free to serve those in need.”

At times, though, there appeared to be some contradictions in assessing the connections between the university and society. In some sense, the university was at the same time

becoming both more distant and more connected. Student leader, Ivan González, explained, “Yes, the relationship between the university and society has changed. There used to be a wall between the two. It was a different world from within the university, when compared to the outside.” But González also noted that there is still a long way to go in completely eliminating the wall. Celía Rodríguez supported such a position, noting that many within the broader society continue to see the university as a “distant, foreign space.” As Rodríguez explained, “Other people see the university as a place where those with money study for free, and that doesn’t seem fair to them.” She went on to add, “With respect to the link between the university and social movements, I believe that the majority of the population doesn’t know that there are bonds between these movements and the university. They don’t know that people in the university are working with the movements, mainly because the communication is poor.” Structurally speaking, at least one professor felt that there was something missing in the manner by which knowledge is transferred to various interested parties and organizations within Argentine society. Mabel López also elaborated on this: “We have a high level of political involvement. We have a high level of self-reflection concerning the broader society. We are interested in society’s needs. But as an institution it seems to me that we are lacking in our ability to transfer knowledge to social organizations, not only in the social sciences, but in all departments.” López saw some individuals and departments as being actively involved and highly successful in transferring knowledge, but at the university level, she saw major shortcomings.

One professor was highly critical of UBA in particular for its lack of engagement in the community and in the broader social and economic needs of local citizens. Speaking mostly from a historical perspective, this professor explained, “In the U.S., people see the university as the key institution in helping to advance corporate interests, community interests, regional development, and so forth. Is this the case in Argentina? No. We see very little of this. In Argentina, I would say that the dominant idea is that the university is an autonomous body, to be kept separate from the broader society to some extent. We’ve had to struggle for many years against the intrusion of political power. The consequence of such a concern for autonomy is very, very low-level connections with firms and even with the community.” But this professor went on to express a degree of optimism regarding the grassroots movement and the growing opportunity for UBA to take a stand in support of restructuring the society around a more democratic economic model. Indeed, this professor had assumed a leading role in opposing neoliberalism. His sharp remarks point to a paradox concerning the Argentine higher education context. Many faculty and students want and expect greater institutional autonomy, while at the same time they see the need for stronger ties and connections to the society. Some fear the privatization of the University of Buenos Aires, including the possibility of increased ties between the university and corporate sponsors, and diminishing autonomy due to increased evaluation by the Argentine government for the purpose of accreditation. For these faculty and students, increased corporate connections with the university threaten the “social-movement” ties that they prefer to build. Consequently, they see state funding as a necessity for maintaining the degree of autonomy required for meeting the needs of what they define as the broader social good. Of course, such a view exists in opposition to the policy positions of the IMF and World Bank, and of neoliberalism in general.

A consistent theme running throughout our discussions focused on recognition of the privilege of working or studying at a university and the social responsibility that comes with it. Even though most faculty and students acknowledged the low level of financial support associated with teaching at a university, they nonetheless believed that they had far more opportunities for professional success than the vast majority of Argentine society.

They also noted the privilege that comes with the life of the mind and the advantages they held over other working and middle-class Argentines. For example, even though faculty and students acknowledged the financial struggles of academic life, they still recognized that they are somewhat separate from the “common folk.” As Carina Pujadas, a professor of law, explained: “I think that all university professors are just like common workers. We don’t differentiate ourselves, not exactly, but we are not viewed as part of the common folks, and also not like part of the elites.” Experiencing both a sense of connection and separation at the same time contributed to a deep sense of obligation on the part of faculty and students involved in various grassroots movements. In addition to their personal politics, this sense of social obligation was added impetus to supporting the Argentine rebellion.

Most certainly, the actions of the faculty and students in this study speak to a different notion of the university than that of the “economic tool” or “academic haven” models. These faculty and students envision a university firmly planted within the society and directly involved in addressing social needs. This is not the university as ivory tower, nor does it reflect the dominant U.S. version heavily framed by academic capitalism. In fact, it is quite unlikely that many of the activities described in this study would ever generate streams of revenue for university actors or the institutions they represent. But what *is* likely is that the forms of engagement described by our research participants may contribute to something bigger than an immediate economic return: a restructured society based on more democratic economic practices along with perhaps more politically engaged citizens knowledgeable of globalization and its localized effects. Clearly, the lessons we can take from these professors and students have implications for how we think about the modern university and its societal obligations.

Discussion: Toward a democratic and emancipatory university

The research presented in this article provides greater clarity about the ways in which university actors in Argentina invest their time and energy in anti-neoliberal movements and how they connect such involvement with their academic work. A driving concern of all the faculty and students we interviewed was a clear recognition of their privileged positions as academics within the University of Buenos Aires. With their privileged vantage point came a sense of responsibility to the broader society and a view of the university as an agent of social transformation; they saw their associations with a prestigious Argentine university as generating forms of privileged knowledge and social spaces that they felt obligated to apply for the benefit of the broader social good.

Participants’ vision of the role and responsibility of the university in Argentina was reflected in their personal actions and in the focus of their research and studies. Most of the faculty and students described the manifestation of this responsibility in terms of knowledge transference and a sense of commitment to applying their expertise to the benefit of others, particularly those most negatively impacted by the economic collapse. This view of the relationship between academic knowledge and society is consistent with the outcomes of the 1918 Cordoba Movement, in which a democratic foundation for the Argentine and Latin American University was partially laid (Walter 1969).

Several faculty and students in this study saw their role as agents of intellectual transference. By offering a more theoretical and research-based understanding of the broader forces shaping Argentina society, they hoped to provide economically marginalized Argentines another lens for viewing their lives. For others, transference was more

instrumental in nature. They provided direct services such as accounting or computer know-how as part of assisting recuperated businesses or other grassroots organizations. Still others spoke of transference in terms of creating stronger bonds among universities, social movements, and community organizations. These individuals were especially cautious about a unilateral view of knowledge transference and spoke of the need to build relationships that foster mutual cooperation and meaningful dialogue in the tradition of Freire (1970, 1998). Whether discussing knowledge transference or more instrumental forms of engagement, the faculty and students in this study sought to strengthen the relationship between the university and society, mainly by constructing a more horizontal and symbiotic relationship. Most of these individuals made a point to acknowledge that the “Argentine public owns the universities,” and therefore, the space belongs to them. The job of the faculty and students, in their opinion, was to make that space open to others.

The view of the modern university advanced by the faculty and students in this study exists in opposition to the neoliberal vision of the university as industry (or economic tool) and the more traditional notion of the university as academic haven (Mollis 2002; Newson and Buchbinder 1988; Schugurensky 2006). Based on the actions and understandings of the faculty and students in this study, as well as our read of the critical literature on the modern university and its responsibility to society, we see the need for a more democratic and emancipatory university. However, our suggestion here should not be interpreted as a defensive act, meant to restore the university in the face of the neoliberal onslaught. Turning back to some mythical past is not the answer, as the university of old was never so inclusive, democratic, nor socially oriented. Although there is much to take from the Cordoba Movement, and the world-wide democratic movements at universities during the 1960s and early 1970s, the challenge in forging a more socially transformative vision of the modern university involves, in Santos’ words, “confronting the new with the new,” for “what existed before was not a golden age and, if it was, it was just for the university and not for the rest of society, and, within the bosom of the university itself, it was for some and not for others” (2006, p. 82).

As part of Santos’ (2006) vision of “confronting the new with the new” he proposed a more democratic and socially conscious university, characterized by a shift from “university knowledge” to “pluriversity knowledge.” University knowledge defines the forms of knowledge produced for the better part of the twentieth century, firmly rooted in disciplinary regimes and distanced to some extent from society and the public good. When university knowledge served society, it did so on its own terms and through its own self-selected methodologies. In contrast, “pluriversity knowledge is a contextual knowledge insofar as the organizing principle of its construction is its application. Because this application is extramural, the initiative for formulating the problems to be solved and the determination of their criteria of relevance are the result of sharing among researchers and users. It is a transdisciplinary knowledge that, by its very contextualization, demands a dialogue or confrontation with other kinds of knowledge” (p. 74).

Santos’ vision of the university grounded in pluriversity knowledge was a response to what he defined as the triple crises of the university. The first crisis, a crisis of hegemony, resulted from the university’s inability to carry out two contradictory functions—the “production of high culture, critical thinking, and exemplary scientific and humanistic knowledge,” necessary for training elites, versus “the production of average cultural standards and instrumental knowledge,” useful for developing a qualified labor force and servicing capitalist production (p. 60). The consequence was that the state and its agents looked beyond the university for alternative sources of higher education and knowledge production. The crisis of hegemony led to a second crisis, one of legitimacy, “provoked by

the fact that the university ceased to be a consensual institution in view of the contradiction between the elevation of specialized knowledge through the restriction of access and credentialing competencies on the one hand and the social and political demands for a democratized university and equal opportunity for the children of the working class on the other hand” (p. 61). Finally, the crises of hegemony and legitimacy led to an institutional crisis in which the university found itself caught between the struggle for “autonomy in the definition of the university’s values and objectives” versus “the growing pressure to hold it to the same criteria of efficiency, productivity, and social responsibility that private enterprises face” (p. 61). The actions of faculty and students in our study are reflective of the institutional crisis and their desire to define the university in service to pluriversity knowledge in which users, in this case, community members, are actively engaged. Such a vision of the university and of knowledge poses a challenge to the dominance of neoliberalism.

Although movement of the university to pluriversity knowledge creates the potential for stronger connections between the university and society, and, in effect, introduces democratizing elements to the academy, the push of neoliberalism over the past 30 years or so has made the university deeply concerned with the revenue potential of its knowledge production (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). The university of the twenty-first century is thus confronted with two opposing pressures: on the one hand, there exists the pressure that comes with a shift to pluriversity knowledge to increasingly answer public demands and better serve societal needs. On the other hand, neoliberalism pushes the university to only concern itself with knowledge production connected to the generation of revenue—“the ultraprivate pressure to commodify knowledge displaces the social responsibility of the university with a focus on producing economically useful and commercially viable knowledge” (Santos 2006, p. 75). Although both of these pressures are likely to exist simultaneously, obviously neoliberal pressures to commodify knowledge severely limit the potential for pluriversity knowledge to serve societal needs beyond those of corporations and big business.

To rectify the problems confronting today’s university, Santos pointed to “democratic and emancipatory university reform” involving a “counterhegemonic globalization of the university-as-public-good” (2006, p. 80). Such a vision stresses a return to national projects and identities, but in a non-nationalistic manner. This is the idea of the state-building university, wherein the university recognizes first and foremost its obligation to society and to advancing national interests (Ordorika and Pusser 2007). For countries faced with economic marginality at the global level, including countries such as Argentina, this counterhegemonic struggle demands resisting neoliberal globalization. Thus, as neoliberalism pushes the erasure of nation-states and national projects and identities—this is especially the case with peripheral and semi-peripheral countries—a counterhegemonic struggle calls for the elevation of a national project in which the university plays a critical role. Again, Santos addressed this issue:

The difficulty and, often, the drama of university reform in many countries reside in the fact that reform involves revisiting and reexamining the idea of the national project, something that the politicians of the last 20 years have hoped to avoid, either because they see such an idea as throwing sand in the gears of their surrender to neoliberalism or because they truly believe nationhood is outmoded as an instrument of resistance. The public university knows that, without a national project, there are only global contexts, and these are too powerful to be seriously confronted by the university’s resistance. (p. 80)

The challenge then is to rebuild the university in peripheral and semi-peripheral countries in a manner supportive of neoliberal opposition and consistent with a national project capable of situating the society within a global context, but not as victim or puppet of global power brokers such as the IMF and World Bank, or the United States for that matter. In this light, the engagement of particular UBA faculty and students in resistance movements in Argentina is wholly consistent with a more democratic and emancipatory view of the university of the twenty-first century and the growing importance that social movements play in forging more democratic social relations. Their involvement is a public and academic demonstration of their devotion to such a vision and the need to enact it through engagement with local communities and organizations.

Conclusion

Neoliberalism has been a powerful force in shaping Argentine social policy since the 1980s and has directed the state to disinvest in social services and public goods, including higher education. Consistent with the neoliberal vision, national evaluation policies and practices for higher education have promoted a structure that favors the commercialization of university programs and services, while advancing privatization in the process. Relatedly, reductions in financial support for universities force them to address the needs and concerns of the private entrepreneurial sector rather than the public sector. This trend challenges the historic vision of the university in Argentina, wherein the university is to serve the broader social good, including local and national needs. Research on the ways in which neoliberal policies are influencing universities is relatively recent and there is much to explore. Moreover, few have researched how faculty and students are involved in social movements to resist the neoliberal push (Rhoads 2003; Rhoads and Mina 2001; Rhoads and Rhoades 2006). By focusing this study on UBA faculty and students actively engaged in anti-neoliberal social movements, we offer a counter-narrative to the notion of the university as economic tool or academic haven. This counter-narrative provides a vision of the university as a vehicle for social transformation, whereby part of the university community is engaged in something other than the pursuit of immediate economic returns. Rather, they are directly involved in creating a vision of society based on more democratic economic practices and a politically engaged citizenry.

The view of the university suggested by the faculty and students introduced in this article is one emphasizing social obligations, as opposed to stressing an opportunistic entrepreneurial vision of the university tapping into any revenue stream available. The democratic emancipatory university, with its commitment to the broader social good, is in a sense a model for individual behavior as well and suggestive of a more community-minded form of citizenship. This spirit of collectivism stands in sharp contrast to the model of citizenship advanced by neoliberalism and unchecked global capitalism, in which a calculus of personal gain is the strategic ideal and individualism the defining quality of social existence. The consequence for societies when citizens come to define their relations to others only on the basis of a self-centered calculus may be devastating for a world that increasingly requires cooperation and a willingness to set aside one's self-interests. Universities must be something more than simply the engines of capital production and enact forms of social engagement fitting the struggles of communities and societies increasingly operating within a complex and conflicted global environment.

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