

# **The Shuttering of Educational Studies: Neoliberalism, the Political Spectacle, and Social Injustice at a “World Class” University**

**By Alyssa Hadley Dunn  
& Morgan Zacheya-Jewel Faison**

The University is a critical institution or it is nothing.  
—Stuart Hall

Higher education represents one of the most  
important spheres in which the battle for democracy  
is currently being waged.

—Henry Giroux

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Late on a Friday afternoon in September 2012, faculty, students, and alumni of the Division of Educational Studies (DES) at Emory University learned, by email, that their Division was one of several slated for closure. The Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, of which DES was a member, issued a statement about Emory’s “new directions” and their pursuit of “eminence.” A pursuit that did not include DES (Dean’s letter, September 14, 2012, p. 1). According to faculty, this announcement came “totally out of the blue.” After all, the Division had

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existed for over ninety years; it had produced hundreds of teachers and scholars, particularly women of color, who had successful careers in schools and universities around the country; and it was a vibrant community of junior and senior scholars with international recognition for their research and scholarly activity.

Yet, despite the disbelief and shock felt in the DES community, the closure of a program that focused on educational foundations and social justice was not new. Across the country, departments and programs in educational studies and foundations faced similar budget cuts or closures. In one month alone, before this manuscript was submitted, the following program cuts were announced: the elementary education Masters program at the University of Illinois-Chicago, the Masters program in social justice and activism at Loyola University-Chicago, and over 20 programs related to education at the University of Akron, as part of a proposed 55-program cut. Like DES, these programs exist at the nexus of university power politics and neoliberalism. This is despite the fact that Emory and other universities claim to be bastions of humanistic inquiry, of justice, and of community engagement.

In this article, we examine the closure of DES as an example of the ways that the neoliberalization of higher education contributes to the extinction of educational foundations programs. What happened at Emory is symptomatic of the impact that neoliberalism has had (and will have) on educational studies. With such departments goes a commitment to understanding the social, cultural, historical, philosophical, and political underpinnings of PK-12 education and, indeed, of higher education itself. We argue that neoliberalism in higher education is advanced by the political spectacle, or the ways in which onstage rhetoric differs from backstage actions (Edelman, 1970), and we do this through a detailed explanation of the DES closure. We also see this article as a way to share the voices of those affected by the shuttering of DES. We have chosen to tell their stories in narrative form, rather than through a traditional qualitative analysis, as we believe their commentary truly speaks for itself. Finally, we offer a brief discussion of why the Emory case matters and what implications this has for the future of educational foundations and teacher education.

This story is both professionally disconcerting and personally troubling to us. As a recent alumna (Alyssa) and a current doctoral student (Morgan), we are deeply troubled by both what occurred and how it occurred. Professionally, we sought to examine what it means to be in a field that is threatened with extinction, just as we are coming of age in the academy. In sections below, we share our personal stories related to the closure, but here, we wish to acknowledge that we are intricately connected to DES's past, present, and future. As insiders in this case, we sought to make the "familiar strange" by speaking with others with different perspectives on and relationships to DES. This variety of stories—from students, faculty, and alumni—are gathered here in an attempt to provide as complete a picture as possible of what it felt like "on the ground" after the closure was announced.

A note on terminology: Throughout the piece, we refer to the closure as a shuttering, from the verb meaning to close down. We chose this term purposefully and to combat the reigning university rhetoric that the elimination of DES was

something that just happened. To shutter is an intentional act, a deliberate move, for example, to block the light from entering through a window. If DES was a window into spaces of educational justice, then Emory administrators attempted to shutter this window to advance their own neoliberal purposes.

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### **Theoretical Frameworks: Neoliberalism and Political Spectacle**

The market's influence on higher education is not a new phenomenon, and research has demonstrated a long history of such involvement in universities around the country (i.e., Bok, 2003; Newfield, 2008; Washburn, 2005). However, the "size and scope" of market ideology has expanded since the rise of neoliberal public policies (Bok, 2003, p. 2). Neoliberalism refers to the set of economic policies that value the free market economy, or private interests, over public interests and social democratic policies (Freidman, 1962). Such doctrine emphasizes individual capital versus social capital and, according to Chomsky (1999), values profit over people. As Hursch (2011) explains, "under neoliberalism, economic inequality does not result from unequal social structures that privilege the already advantaged but, instead, from differences in individual choices and efforts. Inequality, therefore, is deserved and should not be a concern of government" (p. 35). One of the particularly troubling aspects of neoliberal ideology is that neoliberals see no alternative to capitalism (as explained in Margaret Thatcher's infamous "there is no alternative" thesis) and see no need to "debate what obligation society or government has in reducing poverty or inequality" because "the individual entrepreneur seeking to improve his or her own economic situation replaces deliberation over our values and societal goals" (Hursch, 2011, p. 39).<sup>1</sup>

In education, we see this market ethos in "the transformation of educational values into business values" (Tuchman, 2009, p. 7) and in the omnipresence of market terms (Saltman, 2007) in educational policies. For example, in K-12 schools, for-profit charter management groups, online classes, voucher systems, and continued recruitment of under-prepared and under-qualified teachers through programs like Teach For America illustrate neoliberal policies in action (Kavanagh & Dunn, 2013; Saltman, 2007). In higher education, we see a similar movement toward neoliberal dominance in the "changing priorities of universities . . . that raise disturbing questions about what parents and students are getting in return for the increasingly steep tuitions they pay" (Washburn, 2005, p. xiii).

Whether termed neoliberalization, corporatization, privatization, or commercialization, research indicates that:

Twenty-first century higher education echoes Max Weber's characterization of the spirit of 'modern capitalism.' Weber wrote of the spirit of early twentieth-century capitalism: 'Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of materials needs' (Weber, 1958, p. 53). Rather than making a profit being subordinated to man, man is subordinated to making a profit. (Tuchman, 2009, p. 11)

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Though there are many ways we see neoliberal influences on university life—the most frequently discussed being privately-funded research and the emphasis of athletics over academics—we highlight four ways in particular: (1) the market-driven evolution of universities' purposes, (2) the selection of courses and programs, (3) the structuring of university stakeholders as commodities, and (4) an emphasis on globalization. We have chosen to emphasize these four ways that neoliberalism influences university life because we see them as the most important ones for Emory's context.

First, universities' purposes appear to have shifted from being centers of democratic inquiry and intellectual creativity to institutions with more corporate purposes. As Giroux (2007) explains, there exists an

increasing corporate influence on higher education and the currently fashionable idea of the university as a 'franchise' largely indifferent to deepening and expanding the possibilities of democratic public life and increasingly hostile to the important role the academy can play in addressing matters of public service. (p. 7)

Though the academy may never have been as "democratic" as Giroux portends it to be—as universities have always existed to serve the predominantly elite and wealthy and continue to be sites of race and class struggles—the movement away from inquiry-driven decision-making to profit-driven decision-making has been well-documented.

Second, courses and programs are subject to these evolving purposes, as priorities move from liberal arts and social sciences to programs that the university believes will earn more revenue (Peters, 2013). According to Bok (2003), "universities share one characteristic with compulsive gamblers and exiled royalty: there is never enough money to satisfy their desires" (p. 9). Though the university is "in general not-for-profit, meaning that it exists to spend money on making citizens, engineers, writers, and the other forms of what is sometimes called 'human capital,'" Newfield (2008) argues that shifting monetary priorities "reinforced the belief that education is a commodity as measurable as any other, and that administrators must sort the disciplines according to those that supposedly pay and those that supposedly do not" (pp. 169-170).

Neoliberalization of higher education also positions university stakeholders as commodities. Students are consumers, and faculty are frequently contingent labor (Ginsberg, 2011). Schrecker (2010) sees this in "... pressures that are currently deforming the academy by turning it into a dog-eat-dog environment that pits institutions, faculty members, and students against one another in an exhausting and unwinnable struggle for resources" (p. 5). Finally, neoliberalism's emphasis on globalization has been called a "foul wind," a "wholesale cultural shift" from "seeing a university's purpose as intellectual engagement to now seeing it as job training that bends to the whims of the market" (Washburn, 2005, p. ix). In particular, we see the impact of neoliberalism on colleges and departments of education. Bok (2003) calls this influence "undeniable:" "Anyone harboring doubts on this score

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need only contrast the opulence of business schools with the shabbiness of most schools of education and social work” (p. 6).

One technique for advancing neoliberal ideology is the theory of political spectacle. Edelman (1970) first argued that politicians and their reform agendas had two contrasting components: the “onstage” public rhetoric and the “backstage” reality that remains hidden. Edelman (and later, Bennett & Edelman, 1985) asserted that the media and politicians themselves turn rhetoric into a “spectacle,” a symbol to advance political goals. As Dunn (2013) explains, “neoliberals are not alone in their use of the political spectacle; what changes, rather, as new political ideologies take hold are the purposes of the spectacle and the resulting political goals. For neoliberals, their use of the political spectacle is with the aim of advancing private interests and free markets” (p. 51). Edelman’s theory of political spectacle is related to Debord’s (1967/1995) theory of the society as spectacle. As summarized by Vinson, Ross, & Wilson (2010), “the society of the spectacle is modern capitalist existence extended throughout the entirety of social and individual life” (p. 92). Closely related to this work are two central themes in Debord’s work: first, that capitalism has expanded into all parts of our lives, and second that all human life is mere appearance and that what appears can be passively and falsely observed (Vinson, Ross, & Wilson, 2010).

The political spectacle theory has been used to analyze education reforms at the PK-12 level, but little research has charted its influence on the neoliberalization of higher education (Anderson, 2007; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Edelman, 1988, 1970; Koyama & Bartlett, 2011; Smith, 2004; Wright, 2005). We see Smith’s (2004) categorization of political spectacle’s common elements as particularly helpful in our analysis of the Emory case. In the table below, we define each of these elements.

<i>Element of Political Spectacle</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Symbolic language	The use of emotional, evocative language for specific political purposes
Dramaturgy	Theatrical elements like political stages, props, and costumes that are used to advance or undermine a particular policy
Casting political actors as allies and enemies	The positioning of certain people as appealing, emotional characters who can individually change political or social problems (either for better or worse)
Democratic participation as illusion	The fiction that stakeholders of a particular reform have an equal voice when, in reality, decisions have already been made by an elite group
Illusion of rationality	The use of polls and statistics to support claims that political decisions are logical and reasoned
Distinction between onstage and backstage actions	The difference between the public story and the political reality
Disconnect of means and ends	The difference between the costs of a particular policy or initiative and the results

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### **The Story of DES: A Case of One Neoliberal University**

An exemplar case of the influence of neoliberalism on higher education and the political spectacle in university rhetoric is Emory University's closing of the Division of Educational Studies (DES) and several other programs and departments. In the sections that follow, we describe the events as they unfolded at the university and then from the perspectives of people who are part of the DES community.

Methodologically, we approached this as a case study using document analysis and interviews. We reviewed two years of letters, blogs, and newspaper articles from the time of the announcement (September 2012) to the time at which this manuscript was submitted (February 2014). We organized the findings from our document analysis in chronological order so that readers may fully understand the sequence of events, especially since this chronology played an important part in the way our participants processed the shuttering. To incorporate the voices of those affected by the closing, we selected three participants in addition to the two authors, so that a range of experiences could be presented. Additionally, instead of selecting several quotations from each participant, we chose to tell their stories in narrative form. We have disguised participants as much as possible, revealing only their role (student or faculty), and giving them non-traditionally-gendered pseudonyms.

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#### **“The Letter:” An Announcement of the Shuttering**

“The letter” has now become a ubiquitous term for DES faculty, students, and alumni, in reference to a document officially titled the “Emory College Plan” and written by Emory's Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences announcing departmental and program cuts. We argue that the significance of this letter cannot be overstated, as it was the Dean's first attempt to offer an “onstage” (Edelman, 1970) public rhetoric to rationalize the shuttering of DES and several other departments and programs. Further, we argue that the letter was the first step taken by this “world class” university to disengage with DES, a division that is focused on equity and social justice in urban education

On Friday, September 14, 2012, at approximately 3:00 p.m., the Dean of the College notified the Emory community, via email, of the closing of several academic departments and programs, of which the Division of Educational Studies was one.<sup>2</sup> The dismantling, the Dean assured students, would “unfold over a period of years” (p. 2). The Dean pointed out that his plans were a response to faculty and staff concerns that the university's financial resources were being “stretched to the limit” (p. 1). He explained that the allocation of resources across “too many departments” threatened the “world-class” education that Emory students deserved, in order to be well-positioned as the “next generation of leaders” (p. 1). With the Faculty Financial Advisory Committee, the Dean of the Graduate School, and the Provost as key advisors throughout the deliberation process, the Dean used the following questions to delineate between programs that should be shuttered and other

potential areas for “true eminence” at Emory: “(1) Which programs have achieved distinction? (2) What new investments are required? (3) Which programs are truly essential for a twenty first century liberal arts education?” (p. 2).

Though he provided no empirical basis for it, his decision implies that the departments and programs being shuttered have not “achieved distinction,” do not require new investments, or are not “truly essential programs for twenty first century liberal arts education.” Moreover, the Dean identified “new aspirations” that could become areas of strength: quantitative methods and theory, the study of health, the study of human difference, contemporary China studies, digital and other new media studies, and neuroscience (p. 2). Finally, with the resources that would become available from shuttered departments, the Dean foresaw extended opportunities for undergraduate science education and “interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching” (p. 2).

The Dean insisted that the cuts had nothing to do with budget deficits or the financial stability of the College. Rather, the elimination of DES and other programs was an attempt to provide the university with the “flexibility to make the investments our aspirations require” (p. 3). In other words, according to the letter, the shuttering of these programs was simply a step toward positioning the university to “stand at the forefront of liberal arts universities” in the years to come (p. 4).

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### **The Aftermath: Sequence of Events**

The Emory community, as well as local and national news media, immediately began to point out problematic inconsistencies with the “onstage” (Edelman, 1970) rhetoric offered up in the Dean’s letter. Moreover, the public began to note that the Plan masked the neoliberal agenda that was actually underway at Emory—cutting departments that focus on social justice and inequity in scholarship and teaching, while supporting those areas of study that connect to the neoliberal rhetoric of globalization (e.g., contemporary China Studies) and that increase the likelihood of external funding and capital (e.g., neuroscience). Using news articles from local and national media sources, what follows is a chronologically ordered sequence of events that highlights local and national responses and pushback to the Dean’s announcement.

**September.** A series of news stories was released shortly after the Dean’s announcement. While these investigative reports covered the general details of the Plan (Mah & Sommariva, 2012), they also made important observations that reflected a growing concern amongst the Emory community and the broader higher education community. Specifically, these articles pointed out that the Dean’s lack of transparency, of shared governance structures, and of due process during preliminary deliberation is evidence of a veiled or “backstage” (Edelman, 1970) effort to put opportunities for exponential profit over obligations to democratic practices that support the public good.

For instance, the Dean’s argument that resources had been “stretched to the limit” were inconsistent with findings from a 2011 *Chronicle of Higher Education*

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report that found that Emory had “one of the largest endowments in all of American higher education” at \$5.4 billion and was the 16th richest institution in higher education (Desantis, 2012, paragraph 4). Further, the college newspaper asserted that the Dean neglected to adhere to due process policies that would have facilitated dialogue among administration and faculty in the affected programs. In 2012, an economics department lecturer is quoted as saying, “...when [the Dean] claims that he conducted ‘extensive consultations,’ we don’t know with whom, certainly not with a majority of the economics faculty and the department chair...we need transparency” (paragraph 19). The director of undergraduate studies in DES said that he wished the Emory community could have been a part of the discussions that obviously had been taking place “behind closed doors” (paragraph 25). The Dean’s neglect of due process is further confirmed by the fact that the college had been conspiring about these changes in isolation from the faculty of affected programs “for the past four years,” according to *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Diamond, 2012, paragraph 2).

Students’ dissent to the Plan rang out in a letter from the Emory Student Government Association that declared that the Dean’s decision excluded “the involvement—or even—awareness of any current students” (Emory SGA, 2012, paragraph 4). A senior Educational Studies major’s letter to the editor reveals students’ growing concern about the credibility of an institute of higher learning that would consider shuttering the very program that studies education and that provides an “opportunity to learn in one of [Emory’s] most personal, practical, and interactive departments” (Feng, 2012, paragraph 7). In a further attempt to voice their concerns to the administration, approximately 500 students, faculty, and staff from across the university rallied in front of the administration building on the Monday following the announcement of the Plan. Many other students took to social media sites like Facebook and Twitter to voice their opposition to the changes and to begin to organize a collective response (Mulholland, 2012).

At the same time, DES alumni launched an online petition, addressed to President James Wagner and the Board of Trustees, to “continue the important work” of DES. Signed by over 500 supporters within one month, the petition stated:

We, DES students and alumni and supporters, are deeply troubled by the cloaked manner in which this decision was reached by the administration as well as a deliberate decision by the administration of Emory University to disinvest in engagement with public education. Now more than ever, decisions around public education are critical to advancing equity in our local, national, and international contexts. Emory’s specific legacy in the formerly segregated city of Atlanta and mission to ‘create, preserve, teach, and apply knowledge in the service of humanity’ make this decision particularly disheartening.

In concert with current students and faculty, DES alumni took individual and collective action by writing letters to the Emory administration, mailing back their Emory paraphernalia to the Dean’s attention, and pulling their alumni donations. Current doctoral students, in turn, organized a meeting with the Dean of the Gradu-

ate School in an attempt to better understand the administration's position and to clarify what the decision meant for their doctoral careers.

**October.** By early October, concerned undergraduate and graduate students had formed the Student Re-visioning Committee (SRC) in order to provide "a continuum of broad-based, community opposition to the cuts at Emory [that] represents democratic alternatives to authoritarian, opaque, and heavy-handed values embodied in the Emory College Plan and the Dean's 'vision'" (SRC, 2012, paragraph 5). The group called for an immediate reversal of the cuts; democratic governance that meaningfully engaged students, faculty, and staff in all key university decision-making; and "full disclosure" of all College Financial Advisory Committee proceedings (paragraph 5). The SRC was later responsible for producing the "Factsheet on Race and the Emory Cuts," a list of the many ways that the Plan impacts the diversity profile of the university. According to the Factsheet, "with a 40% African American student body, the DES has the highest minority population of any department in the university and has graduated more Black PhDs than any other program of its kind in the country" (SRC, 2012, paragraph 4).

**November/December.** By the end of October, the local Emory chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), a national organization that aims to support academic freedom and shared governance, released a letter to the president questioning the university's due process and calling for an immediate reversal of the decision (Ladd, Strocchia, & Melton, 2012). In early December, the national office of the AAUP sent a letter supporting the local chapter's concerns. Specifically, this letter pointed out that Emory's procedures for discontinuing programs, as they are outlined in the Emory Handbook, are not in accordance with AAUP recommendations which state that "the discontinuation of a program must be based on 'educational considerations' which the faculty as a whole or a small faculty committee must approve beforehand" (Friedman, 2012, paragraph 5). The attention from the national AAUP office illustrates the severity of the supposed "academic decision" made behind the backs of the faculty. Had further pushback from the national AAUP continued past this point, Emory's international reputation and standing could have been threatened by a thorough investigation of their faculty and academic governance.

Meanwhile, the Student Re-visioning Committee staged a nearly seven-hour sit-in in the hallway of the office of the President (Brumback, 2012). Members of the DES community participated in the sit-in, which resulted in an hour-long meeting among five SRC delegates and the Emory President and Dean and Vice President of the College. While the SRC attempted to negotiate a compromise, the Emory leaders seemed uninterested in discussing what they considered "the past." In response to the SRC's demand for a reversal of the cuts, the President responded, "the answer is no" (SRC, December 7, 2012, p. 8). The Dean followed, "The fact is that the cuts have been reviewed and approved by the GovCom and by the Board. I see no need for a future meeting" (SRC, December 7, 2012, p. 11).

**2013: "Shuttering" Continues.** Though he refused to negotiate a compromise

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in December, the President, by early February of the new year, appropriated the language of compromise in an *Emory Magazine* column. He called for the Emory community to “temper ideology” about the cuts and move forward (Wagner, 2013, paragraph 4). He cited his idea of a laudable model of “pragmatic” compromise: the “three-fifths compromise” of 1787, where Northern and Southern congressional delegates compromised to count the enslaved Black population as three-fifths of a citizen (paragraph 3). The letter and the “three-fifths” analogy were poorly received, especially in the DES community where issues of race and power were central. Many faculty and students saw the column as yet another illustration of insensitivity on the part of an out-of-touch administrator (Kiley, 2013). The faculty quickly voted to censure the President (Mah, 2013) and proposed to hold an electronic confidence vote on the President in early spring. The final results of the vote showed that 39.8 percent of the voting faculty were in favor of adopting a motion of no confidence in the President and 60.2 percent voted to reject the motion (Mehrotra, 2013).

The rejection of the vote of no confidence marked the end of further attempts by Emory administration to respond to and communicate with many members of the Emory community. Emory students and faculty participated in more public demonstrations, but were not granted another meeting to negotiate a compromise to the cuts (Burns, 2013). Several lecture-track faculty filed an appeal over the termination of their contracts to no avail, and the College Grievance Committee rejected a collective grievance filed by several faculty that cited multiple violations of Emory bylaws in the Dean’s decision-making process (Francisco, 2013). In less than a year since it was announced, the shuttering of DES and other departments appeared to have become a distant memory for the Emory administration, local media, and faculty in unaffected departments. Yet, for the DES community, there was no possibility of forgetting.

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### **Political Spectacle on the Ground: Voices from the DES Community**

The story of DES and its closure is much more personal than Emory administrators and official communications would have stakeholders believe. All those in the DES community— faculty, students, and alumni—were deeply affected by this decision. In the words of Emeritus professor, Jacqueline Jordan Irvine (2013),

I am profoundly angry, sad, and disappointed that Emory University has no commitment to the urban underserved K-12 students in this metro area; no understanding of its moral and ethical responsibility to the community beyond its fancy Druid Hills’ gates; and apparently no appreciation for the Division’s documented success in mentoring and graduating impressive numbers of talented diverse students from every ethnic and racial group, both nationally and internationally.

In an effort to share the stories of those more intimately affected by the decision, we present narratives from three doctoral students (Morgan, Harper, and Jamie),

one alumna (Alyssa), and one faculty member (Carter). These stories illustrate how the neoliberal political spectacle—particularly the stark contrast between rhetoric and reality—is felt on the ground.

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### **Morgan's Story**

*What was most troubling for me as I read through the letter announcing the closure of my program was the implication that somehow the shuttered programs were lacking in “eminence.” Indeed, it was the eminence of Emory’s educational studies program that brought me back to DES as a doctoral student after having grown up there as a child. As the daughter of one of the many DES Black Ph.D. graduates and now, myself, a third generation educator, I have had a lifetime to observe how excellent preparation in urban education cultivates leaders who go on to impact the lives of hundreds of thousands of children, parents, and teachers who would, otherwise, be forgotten. I came to Emory because I saw that the Emory platform enabled the social justice work of my mother in predominantly Black education settings in southwest Georgia. Moreover, seeing her former students from under-resourced backgrounds grow to become productive and critical citizens in their communities was evidence to me that the impact of Emory went far beyond the students who were privileged enough to attend.*

*What saddens me most about the Emory Plan is the idea that, soon Emory will no longer support the development of professionals who do the important type of work that DES has done for decades. The rhetoric of Emory administrators suggests that this type of work is no longer eminent, prestigious, or relevant enough to be a part of the 21st century agenda at a “world-class” university. Accordingly, my time at Emory has elevated tensions that I never knew existed in the higher education framework—namely the rise of neoliberalism and the colonization of education for private and commercial gain.*

*Before the announcement, I never doubted that Emory was proud of its connection to people like my mother and me who have dedicated their lives to addressing the educational needs of marginalized communities. While I knew that teaching was not a well-respected profession more broadly, I envisioned Emory as being a stalwart higher education leader in its continued ethical engagement with the education of “other people’s children” (Delpit, 1996). I thought that the work of DES played a significant and respected role in the “eminence” of Emory as an institution of higher learning and in its perceived responsibility to the surrounding community. I was wrong. While I am wary about the future of educational studies programs in higher education, I am convinced that educational leaders in the 21st century will be the courageous few that are willing to take a stand for education as a public good.*

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### **Harper's Story**

*I didn't know that they were trying to do any kind of cuts. It's not the kind of thing that you expect to find out on a Friday afternoon... And I would never expect*

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*to find out in an email. Being sent that in an email tells me that you [the university] have no regard for the serious impact that this is going to have on my life in the present and in the future.*

*The rhetoric of 'it's not about budget cuts' [long pause] it's always about money. Because if it had nothing to do with money and if wasn't about allocating resources, then we could have stayed... Why are we pretending that's not what it is? I guess I felt lied to... I think the real reason behind the cuts is that this university wants to make money, and we don't make money. We don't bring enough prestige. We're little, and our impact in the field of education itself [is] not important to the administration because that's not going to get them that ranking. This school is very much an aspiring school; they like to compare themselves to the Ivy Leagues. I feel like instead of just being great, they're getting lost in making sure that people see them as great. Instead of just doing good work, they're busy convincing people that we do good work. There is a lot of identity and image brand management going on here, and we [in DES] don't fit the brand.*

*This will make me apprehensive with administration forever. I never thought of administration as 'us and them' until this happened. I don't see it as a partnership. I don't see it as a symbiotic relationship...and there's no negotiation and no communication. I feel like I went from a democratic view of the university, where administrators were elected officials who made decisions, who heard their constituents, and now I realize it's a dictatorship. Here, decisions are made and handed down.*

*My advice to other scholars is to pay attention. You might have a problem with the university, and you don't even know it. It's time for departments to get together to bring in their stakeholders and just start having conversations about what the university say[s] it wants... Make yourselves loud, make yourselves heard, and make yourselves relevant. Get interdisciplinary; make yourselves indispensable and worth more than your own department.*

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### **Jamie's Story**

*I was in class and [our] professor told us about an email that was just sent out... I think everyone in the class, including myself, thought that he was joking, and we just looked at each other. He had to sort of convince us that this is real and this is happening... I don't think people think about their programs being closed, especially because the program that you pick is the program that had all the human resources that you thought you needed to excel academically. [DES] had different scholars that concentrate in different areas of education, and they're all excellent. You don't think that a program that has all these human resources and all this respect [would be] closing.*

*Their [Emory's] rationale was never fully explained, so that's still like a black box. Even this idea of why some programs stayed open and others did not, and why the departments that stayed open did not become part of these peaceful conversations... How do you process that?... I would think, being an institution of*

higher learning, that everyone who is part of that community would be interested [in knowing the rationale]. We are part of a community and we all, whether we like it or not, we are all going to carry the name of this institution. Wherever we go, we're Emory. And when I noticed that the intellectuals don't care about what happens to their immediate peers, then it got me thinking: are we really intellectuals? Because an intellectual is looking at his or her surroundings all the time and always questioning and wondering.

Then, when I started going to conferences, all of a sudden this idea of colleges of education closing started becoming a prevalent topic... That made me feel that it didn't matter whether the decision had a rationale or not, or whether that rationale was correct or not, the decision was made and there was nothing that could be done that could change that decision... Whatever this department was nurturing, it's not what they're [Emory] interested in and it's not what they want to be known for. But it would be good to know what it is that they don't want to be known for, like what is it about us that they don't want to be known for? Is it that our ideologies don't match the institution? Is it that we don't bring in enough money? Is it that we are too attached to the community? I think that not only [educational studies] programs but all programs need to start asking universities and asking themselves what is it that higher education is now and what is it that is valued. Because we may think that what is valued is this excellence of intellectuals or pursuing the truth, but what if that's not what they're [universities] after nowadays?... If the priorities or the philosophy of higher education has changed, I think people need to know.

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### **Alyssa's Story**

The day after the closure was announced, one of my current Masters students emailed me and said she was interested in applying to Emory for her Ph.D. in Educational Studies. She had been thinking about it for awhile, she said, and upon doing much research, she had determined that DES was a place where she would "fit." It was upon reading her email that the true effect of the closure hit me. Yes, I was already in a form of mourning for the department I had known and loved and that had me the scholar I am today. But what struck me about my student's email was the injustice of keeping future students from having the same experience that I had—an experience that allowed me to learn from luminous scholars, in collaboration with brilliant peers, and in a community that valued collective inquiry above competition. Perhaps nostalgia plays a role in my memories of DES, for now that I am a professor I know that every department has its own struggles and contested history—but I also know that what and how I teach and research continues to be influenced by the valuable education I received in DES.

As a scholar of social justice and educational policy, the influence of neoliberalism immediately jumped out at me. Yet I also wanted to believe that Emory administration would reverse their decision if a strong enough argument were presented to keep DES (or if it became a big enough media headline). I joined with other alumni on conference calls, collaborative letter writing, meetings with current faculty and

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students, and media contacts. In some ways, I thought that alumni like me were perhaps in the best position to fight for DES, as current students and faculty were in tenuous positions to be speaking out against the university that still employed them. Despite the letters, stories online and in the local newspaper, repeated calls to the administration, and rescinding of our donations, no alumni that I know of were ever contacted. As proud as I am of DES, I am similarly disgusted with the continued lack of communication and accountability from Emory administration. Each time I look at my framed diploma on my office wall, I am reminded of the complexity of academia and democratic values that too often are replaced by values of competition and capitalism.

What this has done for me—and I believe for other alumni, as well—is made us increasingly aware of the way that we are complicit with similar strategies at our own universities. It has made me question that policies are explicitly or implicitly neoliberal in form and impact, like the edTPA that standardizes teacher preparation or university budgeting procedures that reward departments with increased grant production and thus endanger educational foundations departments where it is difficult to receive external funding.

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### Carter's Story

It came out of the blue... this news dump on a Friday afternoon of a holiday weekend. It was such a bad way to do this. It felt really cheap... I think the worst thing is that it came at a time when, as a department, we were working very hard to revamp our undergraduate program. We had done a lot of work to make it relevant and research-based. I think that when we began that year we were very excited. We had more majors than ever... Universities have to make decisions about the direction of where they're going, and that doesn't mean they're going to be good for everyone involved. But I do believe that the process by which they make them is really important. If the process isn't transparent and considered fair and people aren't participating in it, then that can have implications beyond the people it affects. I was waiting for them to be more clear about it, for the smoke to clear for them to say: 'here's the committee, the data we analyzed, here's how you played out on these fronts and this is the exact rationale,' especially coming from the Dean who's so enraptured with quantitative methods and research. I thought we'd see spreadsheets. Even if I don't necessarily agree with them, I want to understand the logic and process by which they came to this decision. To this day, I have never even been told one solid reason why DES was cut.

Why do I **ultimately** think they did it? [long pause] I think Emory has eyes on other things than the kinds of things that DES stood for. I think they are aspiring to a larger stage... They saw us as less. I think it's part of a larger devaluation of education as a field, and I don't think we were ever respected. Looking at the leadership of the university, they don't have the same commitments that DES has to social justice. They are committed to excellence and eminence: their own. It's kind of embarrassing. It's not my Emory... I came to the academy thinking there was

*something here, a place to put your ideals into practice. That's been hard for me to see it's not here; it's not at Emory, Inc.. I have this expression now, 'my Emory.' And if I see people doing work and thinking about stuff in ways that is more real, I say 'you're my Emory.'*

*I really thought the university stood for more than it does. I had a very critical stance toward the knowledge industry and the credential industry, and I thought people came here to try to live out higher principles. The second letter—that I have to admit was more devastating to me than the first—was the letter signed by roughly 100 faculty members supporting the Dean in his courageous actions, [saying] how they supported him and what he'd done. I just couldn't believe that my fellow faculty wouldn't demand a better accounting of the process that didn't affect them this time, but could just as easily have been them... It's cleared up for me that, in these large institutions that espouse these values [of democracy and justice], that they don't have to live them... They have a massive, muscular marketing and PR department that can represent them, and what they do on the inside can be completely different. The super hierarchical, top down model is alive and well at Emory, and they've shown they can continue to do that. It fits in with a lot of the stuff that's been happening at universities with larger agendas about power. To feel it has been a very educative experience, to be on the receiving end...I both saw the best and worst of it [the academy as a whole]...Universities gather a lot of people who really want to do good in the world, [but then] put them in boxes where they credentialize the status quo... Universities can be both beacons of democracy and beacons of a patriarchal system of knowledge and power. This place runs like the latter. My experience at this elite institution has left a really bad taste in my mouth for the direction of higher education. I think it's been co-opted by a model of accountability, and it's not very humanistic. It's just almost like this gigantic self-serving, job-training mess. It's got a personality of a corporation that's obsessed with itself and its own reputation and eminence.*

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## Summary

The exemplar case of Emory University's shuttering of Educational Studies illustrates the ways that the neoliberal political spectacle operates in higher education contexts. Our analysis of documents and the personal perspectives of students, alumni, and faculty reveal specific components of the political spectacle outlined above. For example, we see the use of *symbolic language* when administrators' rationale for cutting programs employed language like "world class," "21st century," and "prestige" to justify cutting programs. Words like these may seem common in university discussions, but the way such terms were employed in the justification for cutting programs disguised true profit-seeking motives. There was no explanation of exactly what these words meant, which allowed the administration to deploy them in whatever way they chose. Symbolic language like this begs the question: if a department that was home to nationally and internationally recognized professors who were prolific researchers and held national leadership positions, as well

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as graduated successful and highly-sought-after alumni, is not prestigious or world class, then what is? If a department that prepares teachers to work with diverse groups of children in urban areas is not reflective of the needs for the 21st century, then what is?

There is also the *illusion of democratic participation*, as Emory administration claims to have involved faculty in the decision-making process, but no faculty or students from affected departments were consulted ahead of time. As revealed in Carter's narrative above, the faculty were as surprised as the students. In the year leading up to the announcement, there were multiple opportunities for the faculty to be consulted. Even though the department submitted a self-study in the semester prior to the closure announcement, they were not told anything was in process. Further, the university approved the hire of two new tenure-track faculty who began just two weeks prior to the announcement. In a university that claims to live by a "vision of an inquiry-driven, ethically engaged and diverse intellectual community," administrators remained stalwart against inquiry and ethics related to democratic participation of faculty. Participation was further restricted after the announcement when administrators refused to give a clear-cut, evidence-based explanation about why the program was closed and, according to Carter, "To this day, I have never even been told one solid reason why DES was cut."

We also see the *distinction between onstage and backstage action*, where Emory says that it "stands for what is good," while the backstage reality reveals a cutting of programs that focus on equity and justice. Onstage, the university claims to nurture academics to "empower the active, passionate pursuit of learning for a better world," yet, backstage, they inhibit the pursuit of learning related to educational foundations and social justice. According to their Ethical Principles, "Emory seeks to uphold the dignity and rights of all persons through fair treatment, honest dealing, and respect." However, as revealed the students' narratives above, they felt they were treated with anything but fairness, honesty, and respect.

Finally, there is a *disconnect between the means and ends*. As with other institutions of education, one way we can view Emory's ends in terms of their mission, or what they aim to achieve in their community. Emory's mission is "to create, preserve, teach, and apply knowledge in the service of humanity." To achieve this mission by eliminating DES—a department that serves humanity in its research, teaching, and service—is counterintuitive at best. Another way to view Emory's ends is by the claims made in the Dean's letter: to achieve distinction and eminence. We argue that the means to get there also definitively does not include shuttering DES, a well-respected and important contributor to the field of education.

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### Coming of Age as a Teacher Educator in the Age of Extinction

What does it mean, then, for us to "come of age" as teacher educators at a time when the programs that educated us and in which we hope to educate others are being threatened with extinction? We find that, as mentioned in Carter's story above, we are seeing the best and the worst of the academy immediately upon entering

it. The political spectacle that remained hidden from many of our predecessors is now our omnipresent and obvious reality. In a sense, we see the man behind the curtain before he pulls the shutters closed.

One of the concerns of educational foundations scholars, and the theme addressed explicitly in this special issue, is the threat of extinction. As departments are cut and the number of faculty hired in existing departments continues to stagnate or shrink, there are even fewer scholars to fight for the vitality and growth of the field. Thus, the question about extinction makes us wonder: are we an endangered species already? And, if so, who protects us? With only slight irony, we ask: Is there an EPA for endangered scholars? Do we qualify for special protections and for programs that would not only stop our endangerment, but actually increase our presence? How can we engage in protecting ourselves and others so that those committed to social justice and equity remain important contributors to the academy?

Indeed, the case of Emory, we have found, raises more questions than answers. We expect that other contributors to this issue will have different visions of what it will take to reinvigorate the field and save it from extinction. If we know the stakes, and we know they are incredibly high for ourselves, our students, and the communities that we serve, then we can no longer afford to ignore the changes that the neoliberalization of higher education is having on educational foundations programs and scholarship. Below, we describe several spaces of possibility for reinvigorating the field and reaffirming social foundations' relevance and importance in university life.

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### **Communication**

One of the first implications that has arisen from our work on this manuscript is the need for continuous communication about the shuttering of programs and departments. For example, in the aftermath of the DES closure announcement, there was such intense confusion, shock, grief, frustration, and anger that there was little time to think about the larger, systemic issues at play outside the university. The faculty and students were simply trying, according to one participant, to "make it day to day." And though we initially felt as if we needed to apologize to our participants for making them relive their trauma as they shared their stories with us, they commented later that it was helpful and liberating to finally discuss the ways that Emory's decision is reflective of a national phenomenon.

Time, space, and opportunity for structural critique are vital to seeing the intersections between the personal and the political. Such dialogue needs to continue within and across programs, including those that have been cut and those that are looking for ways to ensure their vitality. This special issue is one such way to begin that dialogue. Other ways might be through presentations and workshops at annual conferences of our professional organizations or by planning a special conference on this specific topic in order to gather a large body of scholars with a shared commitment to preventing ongoing closures.

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### Developing a Shared Community

One thing that the Emory situation has illustrated about the broader contexts is that departments that universities see as peripheral—even if the departments do not see themselves that way—are at the greatest risk of being cut. Indeed, at Emory, DES was literally and figuratively situated on the edge of campus, in a building where administrators seldom ventured to see the vibrant learning taking place. We fear that the story of DES may soon become another statistic in a line of programs and departments that fall prey to universities' capitalist goals. When universities value profit over people, they fail to recognize—or choose to ignore—the importance of programs, faculty, students, and initiatives that do just the opposite. One way we see this changing is increased community organizing across departments. As Carter and Jamie discussed above, faculty whose programs were not cut the first time may run the risk of seeing something similar happen in the future if they do not take a stand. Similarly, Schrecker (2010) argues that “divisions within the professoriate may very well be more of a threat” (p. 182) than corporatization and that “there is no powerful faculty voice in today’s debates about the status of higher education, an absence that stems, at least in part, from the disappearance of a shared community within the academic profession” (p. 221).

This “shared community” is especially important, we believe, for those in social foundations programs. It is equally vital to devote time, energy, and resources to building a shared community between faculty in foundations programs and teacher education programs, and between these programs and other departments across the university. We are not advocating developing a community merely so that one has allies in the case of program cuts, as we think there is inherent value in interdisciplinarity. These partnerships can be beneficial and strategic without being exploitative. Primarily, we see this as an issue of self-care. As Audre Lorde (1988) wrote, “caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (p. 131).

Like Harper relayed, social foundations programs have to make themselves indispensable by connecting with other programs so that an extended network of faculty and students would be enraged if the program was cut. It cannot just be those cut who are fighting back, or else, as Carter described, it is seen as “whining.” It is vital, in this tenuous time, to be proactive instead of reactive.

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### Collective Organizing and Speaking Out

We can no longer rely on tenured faculty to be the sole voices of dissent on our campuses; for that population, though empowered by job security, is growing smaller by the day. Untenured and contingent faculty also need to collectively voice our concerns about the direction of our fields. Educational foundations scholars are accustomed to critiquing and analyzing power, inequity, and marginalization outside the university walls. But it is equally as important to do so within one’s own profession and university. In some ways, we would argue this is even more

important in this era of neoliberalism. If we do not proactively speak out against the corporatization of our own universities, we run the risk of losing our jobs, jobs that enable us to participate in public dialogue about education and advocate for social justice and equity in PK-12 schools. As described in the Committee on Academic Standards and Accreditation (2013), “we must work against narrow conceptions of education and schooling which marginalize or otherwise minimize the knowledge, culture, and experiences of some populations within our society while privileging others” (p. 108). These “narrow conceptions of education and schooling” are now prevalent in our universities, and we must fight against them, as well.

In sum, despite the threat to educational and social foundations programs around the country, the legacies of these programs are not at risk of extinction. Despite the neoliberal push for *profit*, faculty, students, and alumni of these programs know the inherent value of *people*—of their histories, philosophies, and experiences. In addition to a call for collective organizing, increased communication and community building between departments, and a commitment to standing up for ourselves and our profession, we would like to end this manuscript with the words of DES Emeritus Professor Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, in which she considers the possibilities for nurturing the legacy of programs like DES:

No university president or dean can close down or phase out what the DES was and is. No one can erase or close down our individual and collective memories... More importantly, no president or dean can obliterate our commitment to keep the spirit and values of the Division alive by the ways we will continue to mentor, develop, support, and care for all the students and colleagues who come in contact with us now and in the future. I have been around long enough to see how my former students help their students and I know these students will do the same. If we hold fast to our beliefs and maintain our contacts with each other, the circle can never be broken. The Division will survive.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> Though beyond the scope of this article, readers may wish to consult additional research on the history of neoliberalism and neoliberal educational policies. For example, see Apple (2001); Apple, Au, & Gandin (2009); Chomsky (1999); Dunn (2013); Giroux (2004); Hursh (2011); Kavanagh & Dunn (2013); and Saltman (2007).

<sup>2</sup> Other affected units were the Department of Physical Education (which was already in the process of being dismantled at the time of the announcement), the Department of Visual Arts, and the Journalism program. Graduate admission to both the Spanish and Economics programs would be suspended in order to allow the graduate school time to “reimagine” the role that education in these areas would play at Emory. Likewise, graduate student admission in the Institute for Liberal Arts (ILA) would be suspended to allow time for re-visioning ways to increase ILA’s role in “interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching.”

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