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*“The Numbers Are There but the Attention is
Elsewhere”:
An Analysis of The Boyer Report*

SARALYN MCKINNON-CROWLEY

Baylor University

AARON W. VOYLES

The University of Texas at Austin

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“The Numbers Are There but the Attention is Elsewhere”: An Analysis of The Boyer Report

SARALYN MCKINNON-CROWLEY & AARON W. VOYLES

Baylor University & The University of Texas at Austin

Abstract

A 1998 report from the Boyer Commission called “Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America’s Research Universities” issued a series of directives, suggestions, and critiques concerning the then-current state of undergraduate education at research universities. The document caused a minor media firestorm in the higher education and national outlets. This paper will analyze the report, the media responses to the report, and the academic articles inspired by it through the lens of the neoliberal economic models influencing higher education, encapsulated in the titular quote from the report regarding deficits in undergraduate education. We argue that neoliberal concepts infiltrated the discourse surrounding undergraduate education and provide the underpinnings for a value-added perspective on undergraduate education. We describe the historical circumstances influencing the report, conduct a poststructural analysis of the report using the lens of neoliberalism, and reflect upon the impact of the report for contemporary student affairs practitioners and faculty collaboration.

Keywords: Language, faculty affairs, neoliberalism, academic capitalism

Dedication

Dr. Somers was a true inspiration as a scholar and as a mentor. Saralyn took two classes with Dr. Somers and learned from her dedication to student success and willingness to try new pedagogical techniques. Dr. Somers was also passionate about international education and connecting students to Fulbright resources, a real specialty of hers. At her memorial, the officiant described her as a “life-friendly professor,” which has been an inspiration to us. Aaron served on several committees with Dr. Somers and appreciated her wisdom and perspective in developing higher education curriculum. Dr. Somers was a constant advocate for students and how the program could be supportive of their individual needs, a model for both authors to follow in their lives.

Introduction

In 1998, a report from the Boyer Commission called “Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America’s Research Universities” issued a series of directives, suggestions, and critiques concerning the current state of undergraduate education at research universities. Due to its bold call for action and critique of the state of higher education for student success, the document, hereafter called The Boyer Report or “the report,” caused a minor media firestorm in the higher education and national outlets (e.g., Wilson, 1998). The Boyer Report provided prescribed pathways for remodeling education through a connection to analytical, fiscal, and operational components. The report has since been updated twice to modernize the components discussed in both 2002 and again in 2022 (The Boyer 2030 Commission, 2022; Katkin, 2002).



The Boyer Report provided a vision that spanned how higher education approached undergraduate education across institutions. It positioned itself as a comprehensive, authoritative look at how undergraduate education was evolving and what institutions needed to do to meet the needs and challenges of the next generations of students. Specifically, the report asked research institutions to lean into their status, size, and connections, as opposed to traditional so-called liberal models of education. As such, the report is worthy of a retrospective analysis to understand the context of its creation and its impact on higher education. We argue that while the report was heavily discussed after its release, its effects have persisted throughout the succeeding decades and permeated the way in which higher education has approached undergraduate study. Given the latest update’s vision towards the next six years, it is timely to reinvestigate the report and its impact.

In this article, we therefore analyze The Boyer Report, the media responses, and the academic articles inspired by the report through the lens of the neoliberal economic models influencing higher education during the time period and in the present (McKinnon-Crowley, 2022), encapsulated in the titular quote from the report regarding deficits in undergraduate education (The Boyer Commission, 1998). We argue that neoliberal concepts infiltrated the discourse surrounding undergraduate education and provided the underpinnings for a value-added perspective on undergraduate education. These neoliberal assumptions reinforce a view of undergraduate higher education as chiefly economically beneficial and faculty as the sole dispensers of a contractually obligated service. In this article, we will describe the historical circumstances and people which influenced the original report, the media responses to the report, conduct a poststructural analysis of the report using the neoliberal lens, and reflect upon the impact of the report on contemporary student affairs practice. Additionally, we will examine how the implications of neoliberal discourse produce ongoing ripples for student affairs.

What is Neoliberalism?

For the purposes of this paper, we define neoliberalism in two ways: economically and discursively. Neoliberal economic assumptions that came to the forefront of American and British governmental philosophy in the 1980s concerning the public good and the purpose and economic value of education undergird The Boyer Report (Esson & Ertl, 2016; McKinnon-Crowley, 2022), though it flourished in the soil set by earlier economists like Friedrich Hayek (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Economic neoliberalism, as presented by Olssen and Peters (2005), is “a politically imposed discourse” in which “the state seeks to create an individual that is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur” (p. 314; p. 315). In education, neoliberalism operates through “a positive conception of the state’s role in creating the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operation” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 315). In this view, the *only* purpose the state has is to create a free, unfettered market (Boyd, 2011; Gonzales & Ayers, 2018; Levin, 2005, 2017). Discursive neoliberalism is how this philosophy functions at the level of individual actions (Han, 2017; McKinnon-Crowley, 2022). We ask the reader to keep both of these concepts in mind when we deploy the term in this paper.

Neoliberalism, Higher Education, and Student Affairs

The perpetuation of this neoliberal discourse and its associated impacts has vast ramifications for student affairs departments and professionals. We define student affairs as the role within higher



education that handles aspects of student experience outside the classroom, such as orientation, sorority and fraternity life, residence life, and student conduct (Voyles et al., 2019). A supposedly authoritative document that filters educational success through an economic approach marginalizes the qualitative, holistic, and humanist work from student affairs professionals that cannot be quantified in an algorithmic way (Han, 2017; McKinnon-Crowley, 2022; Smithers, 2023). Furthermore, the centering of faculty as deliverers for an educational *product* to students as *consumers* positions student affairs as superfluous and asks how student affairs work and production is an economic value-add for the student consumers (Squire & Nicolazzo, 2019). We do not believe that student affairs work can be reduced to an economic cost/benefit analysis, and indeed posit that such an analysis necessarily marginalizes student groups and identities who most need the support of universities and who are least captured by the discourse of streamlined efficiencies (Smithers, 2019).

Method

We investigated the history of the Boyer Report and analyzed its discourse from a poststructuralist perspective. For this paper, we define discourse as a tool of poststructural analysis that signifies a form of power relations unconsciously created and sustained by society that implicitly limits possible words, actions, and thoughts by its existence (MacLure, 2003; Voyles et al., 2019). In order to engage the Boyer Report for this analysis, we employed a twofold process. First, we performed a close reading the original Boyer Report (The Boyer Commission, 1998), looking for ruptures and breaks in the discourse, where we found overt and covert signals of neoliberalist discourse. Then, we gathered the popular media and scholarly journal reception (primarily through editorials) surrounding the Boyer Report, looking for their connections to the neoliberalism discursive node presented in the Boyer Report. Third, we reviewed the scholarly articles that mentioned the Boyer Report for the discursive moves relating to neoliberalism. Finally, we reviewed updates of the Boyer Report to see what had changed in subsequent years.

Stemming from the tradition of poststructuralist, Foucauldian discourse analysis (Foucault, 1980, 1991), we did not try to focus on a totalizing history, but instead investigated both factors immediately impacting the Boyer Report, and its impact on higher education discourse and the neoliberal framing present in higher education.

In this methodology, we aimed to construct a recent history of the report, characterize its popular and scholarly media depictions, and systematically analyze those to see what emerged. Following scholars who have grappled with the challenges of writing scholarly narratives of near-contemporary times (Romano, 2012; Romano & Potter, 2012), we were careful to be open to what we saw and “question[ed] the narrative” “developed about the past” for the Boyer Report and its role in changing higher education at research-intensive universities (Romano & Potter, 2012, p. 16). When analyzing, we looked for neoliberalism’s current form as of this writing rather than the way it would have operated in the 1990s. In the wake of Foucault (1972), we aimed for a fluid process focused on where nodes of discourse became apparent. We also employed strategies from Kendall and Wickham (1999), who aimed to refine Foucault’s process, and constructed our investigation by examining how The Boyer Report produced the *sayable* and delimits the *unsayable* in its framing of higher education. When we analyzed the data following this process, we initially noted the content. On subsequent readings, we looked for manifestations of the value of education in these nodes,



where we found a dominant neoliberal discourse and the perpetuation of neoliberal concepts within the report.

The Boyer Report: Who, What, When, and Where

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching published The Boyer Report in 1998 as the result of a three-year study sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation (Bateman, 2010; The Boyer Commission, 1998). According to their mission statement, the Carnegie Foundation is a research center that has “set its sights on tackling the nation’s most significant educational challenge: achieving educational equity for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian and Pacific Islander, and first-generation students, as well as those from low-income households” and committed to using its resources to foster new research and practice collaborations in service of this aim (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d., para. 3). Initial work on the report began in 1995 under the leadership of Ernest L. Boyer, the President of the Carnegie Foundation. After Boyer’s death in 1995, the Commission was renamed “The Boyer Commission” in his honor.

The Boyer Commission’s makeup included 11 members, six working directly in academia, three from American educational government agencies such as the National Academy of Sciences and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and arts and science organizations, as well as a designer and illustrator (The Boyer Commission, 1998). Katkin (2003) described the commission as “made up of eminent and creative thinkers from academia, government, and the arts;” the selection process for commission members is not described in the report itself (p. 21). Shirley Strum Kenny, president of the State University of New York at Stony Brook, chaired the commission and spoke to the media about the report after its publication. Robert W. Kenny, Shirley Strum Kenny’s husband and not a member of the commission, wrote the report (The Boyer Commission, 1998; Goldberg, 1999).

The rationale for constructing the report came from the perception that students attending research universities were not receiving the best education for their money. Per the report, research universities (using the Carnegie classification) receive money from undergraduate students but often do not provide them with a product of equivalent value in return (The Boyer Commission, 1998, p. 1). Though universities had made strides toward changing undergraduate education, the Commission (1998) deemed these “cosmetic surgery” rather than “radical reconstruction” of institutional priorities (p. 6). A pervasive separation between faculty and graduate students, which reached to the undergraduate population, leading to alienation between students and faculty. Faculty were loyal solely to their discipline; students were puzzled by both disciplinary boundaries and a culture focused on research rather than teaching at their institution. According to Bateman (2010), the Commission was inspired by an undergraduate curriculum reform movement originating in the 1980s and a data-driven response to curriculum effectiveness and change taking place in the 1990s. National panels like the Business-Higher Education Forum proposed education reform based on non-discipline-specific results such as “critical thinking, problem solving, effective communication, and responsible citizenship” supported by reported workforce needs (Bateman, 2010, p. 108). The Boyer Commission wrote in response to these calls for reform and focused specifically on research universities due to their numerical influence on undergraduate education in the United States (The Boyer Commission, 1998; Katkin, 2003).



The report described the contemporary state of undergraduate education in the United States at research universities. It decried the lamentable amount of monetary and temporal resources provided for the undergraduate experience and offered 10 recommendations for change. These recommendations included centering the undergraduate education experience on research-based learning, creating a unified first-year experience focusing on inquiry, linking communication and writing to the undergraduate curriculum, improving graduate and faculty pedagogy, providing incentives to good teachers, and making a sense of community for all members of the research university campus (The Boyer Commission, 1998, pp. 15-36). Conceptually, the report suggested, the culture of research institutions should meaningfully change to prioritize undergraduate education. According to the report, administrative structures ought to reward quality undergraduate teaching, and offer financial incentives and tenure-related benefits to faculty who dedicated their time to undergraduate students. Upon its release, the report generated much commentary within the higher education community (e.g., Cornwell & Marcus, 1998; Lepkowski, 1998).

The Contemporary and Current Response

Published on the Stony Brook website, the report received over 15,000 visits within the first week of its publication (Cornwell & Marcus, 1998). Publications as diverse as *Science*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *The Times Higher Education Supplement* covered the report's release (Holden, 1998; Sandham, 1998; Wilson, 1998). Responses from the higher education sector varied. Some industry representatives expressed dissatisfaction with the report's invective, claiming that the reforms suggested in the report were already in progress and discounted by the report's authors (Bateman, 2010). Writing in *Chemical Engineering News*, Lepkowski (1998) reported: "The [Boyer] commission thought its report would be controversial. It was right. Media accounts elicited an outraged response from presidents of many of the country's top universities" at the spring meeting of the Association of American Universities (AAU) (p. 9). An article in *Science* reported that Dr. Kenny, the commission chair, wanted the report to be "a call to arms" though the AAU president, Cornelius Pings, characterized the report as an inaccurate picture of research university faculty's efforts to engage undergraduates in research (Holden, 1998, p. 681). Lepkowski (1998) presented a dissenting voice from The Boyer Commission in the form of Bruce Alberts, President of the National Academy of Sciences, who suggested that the report diminished the effort universities have made to reform freshman teaching. Dr. Kenny stated that the report was not intended to be "inflammatory" but rather "a 'wake-up call'" for "persistent" problems facing research-intensive institutions (Lepkowski, 1998, p. 9).

Other responses to The Boyer Report were positive. They applauded the creative and substantive approach to reforming undergraduate education. In an editorial for the *Journal of Chemical Education*, Moore (1998) wrote:

Its [the Commission's] report deserves a careful, critical reading by all of us, not just those at research universities. Such a reading will certainly broaden our thinking about how we might improve the teaching/learning process, and it might just cause us to change some preconceived notions. Applying to the problem of improving undergraduate education the same kind of thought and creativity that go into research projects is something we all should do more often. (p. 935)



Moore framed undergraduate education as a problem to be solved, encouraging faculty buy-in by presenting undergraduate education as a tempting research question and downplaying the rhetoric of the report. Almost all media coverage besides Moore’s editorial focused on the searing indictments of undergraduate education proposed by the report (Cornwell & Marcus, 1998; “Research Universities Neglect Students,” 1998; Sandham, 1998; “Undergrads Shortchanged,” 1998; Wilson; 1998). Moore’s affirming response to the report was echoed by academic articles written years later about the report’s impact on undergraduate education (Bateman, 2010; Hu et al., 2007; Katkin, 2003).

The Report’s Impact

Studies conducted on the effectiveness of the report indicate that at least some of the suggestions for reform have been implemented in the nation’s universities. In a quantitative study concerning the frequency of undergraduate research in all institutions of higher education, Hu et al. (2007) found that the amount has increased nationwide after 1998. Their data, however, indicated that this increase was not limited to research universities, and access to research programs at research universities is limited to the most academically successful students. The Boyer Report was updated in 2002 with the results of a longitudinal mixed-methods study of research institutions and their progress toward implementing the report’s suggestions (Katkin, 2003) and again in 2022 (The Boyer 2030 Commission, 2022).

In the recent update, The Boyer 2030 Commission adopted language around equity and a classic, liberal education, but maintained a framework of neoliberalism. For example, its references to equity are framed in regard to what businesses desire in hiring and how businesses value diversity of identity and thought. It encouraged institutions to track job placements as a way of understanding how ‘world ready’ students are on the pathway to economic independence.

Even its most progressive diversity, equity, and inclusion discussions are framed within a response to a dominant neoliberal discourse. In a way, The Boyer 2030 Commission is responding to a discursive node that it employed and perpetuated within higher education.

As a result of the report, an attitudinal change regarding the value of undergraduate education has taken place on certain campuses. After the report’s publication, universities supposed “research engagement in various forms” both “in formal ways, such as designated courses, funding support, and organizations to help open opportunities for research in the lab and elsewhere” and to increase students’ professional development opportunities (Douglass & Zhao, 2013, p. 2). Per Katkin (2003), campus administrative leaders have employed The Boyer Report as “ammunition” to increase attention paid to undergraduate education (p. 35). As a result of the report’s “call to arms,” the administrative generals had marshaled their considerable institutional forces toward improving undergraduate education, with observable, quantifiable results (Cornwell & Marcus 1998, p. 12). The Boyer Report has contributed to a nationwide growth in undergraduate research efforts at research-intensive institutions and elsewhere in all disciplines (Cooper et al., 2019; Craney et al., 2011; Larracey et al., 2023).



The Boyer Report: The Why

The Boyer Report creates a market for a particular type of undergraduate education by outlining an ideal of what that education should be, namely a sound financial investment with appropriate monetary returns. The Boyer Report's conception of a university is fundamentally market-based.

The Business of Undergraduate Education

The following excerpt from The Boyer Report encapsulates the most inflammatory language utilized in the report, and made visible the neoliberal assumptions underlying the logic of the Commission:

The research universities have too often failed, and continue to fail, their undergraduate populations. Tuition income from undergraduates is one of the major sources of university income, helping to support research programs and graduate education, but the students paying the tuition get, in all too many cases, less than their money's worth. An undergraduate at an American research university can receive an education as good or better than anything available anywhere in the world, but that is not the normative experience. Again and again, universities are guilty of an advertising practice they would condemn in the commercial world. Recruitment materials display proudly the world-famous professors, the splendid facilities and the ground-breaking research that goes on within them, but thousands of students graduate without ever seeing the world-famous professors or tasting genuine research. Some of their instructors are likely to be badly trained or even untrained teaching assistants who are groping their way toward a teaching technique; some others may be tenured drones who deliver set lectures from yellowed notes, making no effort to engage the bored minds of the students in front of them. (pp. 5-6)

This passage revealed a preoccupation with the economic value of education and the role of the research universities as a dispenser of a financially beneficial services. The chief rationale in this passage for improving undergraduate education is that they are paying for this service, and therefore deserve their money's worth. Continuing to deploy the language of business, the report's authors protest the false advertising utilized in recruiting materials because the product promised does not have the promoted result. Graduate student and tenured faculty's quality of teaching frames the effectiveness of the service in terms of customer satisfaction. The language and neoliberal assumptions of this passage, often quoted in its media coverage, permeates the rest of the report and contributed to a neoliberal discourse regarding education as a good which can be bought and sold on the public, open market to make more effective consumers.

The Boyer Report constructs the undergraduate at a research university as an enterprising consumer who exercises his or her "sovereignty" in choosing and receiving an appropriately valuable education (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 315). Acting in a similar role to the state, The Boyer Commission reframes the public good of education as an economic good, influenced by tenets of public choice theory and its pioneering conceptualization of politicians and policy actors as economic actors (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Rizvi, 2006). Public choice theory often conceptualizes market governance as "a supply-side process of 'governing without governing', a process by which compliance is extracted through systems that measure performance according to both externally imposed levers,



and internally reinforced targets” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, pp. 319–320). Undergraduate education is successful when graduates are appropriately prepared for careers.

Businesses also seem to be the intended audience for the product of universities. The report stated, “corporate leaders complain that new Ph.D.s too often fail as communicators and cannot advance their own careers or contribute to the success of their companies,” a failure that research universities ought to address (The Boyer Commission, 1998, p. 30). The Boyer Report extricates compliant behavior from its higher education audience by creating a method to measure performance of undergraduate institutions and deploying strong language to compel institutions to fall in line with the requirements made in the report. Media coverage of the report, encouraged and utilized by The Boyer Commission’s chair, became a discursive tool to regulate acceptable undergraduate education. Acceptable undergraduate education, per the report, does not include academically underprepared students.

Discursive Exclusion

In the report, the ideal undergraduate student is one who enrolls ready and able to learn at the level expected by the faculty. Academic preparation includes “satisfactory mathematics and oral and written language skills” needed “before taking any credit courses” (The Boyer Commission, 1998, p. 20). Continuing the description of the ideal student, they write: “remediation should not be a function of a research university; for a research university to devote a large portion of its faculty time and its facilities to prepare students for university study represents a dissipation of increasingly scarce resources;” the onus for academic preparation lies with the student and explained away through a neoliberal preoccupation with efficient dispensation of “resources” (The Boyer Commission, 1998, p. 20). Remediation is specifically removed from the purview of research universities to other institutional types. Writing an editorial regarding the report, this sentiment is echoed by Moore (1998):

In at least one area, remedial work at the freshman level, faculty will probably applaud the commission’s report. It proposes that remedial work should be carried out before a student enrolls in a research university: through summer programs, in pre-college institutions, at other kinds of post-secondary institutions, or by special, noncredit courses such as English as a second language. Students in beginning courses would then be ready for the significantly different, inquiry-based kind of education that is advocated for the first year. (p. 935).

The removal of students who are not ‘ready’ for college reveals a lack of attention to pervasive structural inequities impacting student academic preparation. Students who require any remedial work receive a message of non-belonging and the assumption that they are not the kind of students The Boyer Commission would like research universities to teach, the students who “will provide the scientific, technological, academic, political, and creative leadership for the next century” (1998, p. 13). By implication, students needing remedial work require outside assistance and discursively constructed as not being those types of leaders.



Discursive Exclusion and Graduate Students

In particular, the report features a concerning framing where non-native English-speaking teachers are singled out as an area of high concern and as (The Boyer Commission, 1998):

One of the conspicuous problems of undergraduate education. Unless fully proficient speakers of English are attracted to the professoriate in the United States, these problems will continue to exist. Research universities have, therefore, a strong interest in introducing research-based education to undergraduates who are proficient in English in the hope that many of those research-trained undergraduates will be drawn toward academic careers. Joined by the bright and eager international students, they will furnish unprecedented pools of talent from which future faculties will be drawn. (p. 10)

Faculty and their wellspring, graduate students, are only valuable inasmuch as they speak English well. Coupled with their research ability, their linguistic proficiency is the extent of their value to the university. This framing continues the neoliberal trend of reducing students to numerical statistics in which their added value (so to speak) is related to their ability to achieve economic success through education (Smithers, 2019). When the value of education is economized, populations that are not immediately successful are necessarily marginalized through either exclusion or the building of deficit-model interventions.

The implication here is that research universities are disincentivized to train or help those who are *not* proficient in English, implying ability in the language to be a fixed, immutable characteristic and prioritizing the abilities of first-language English speakers in what Tavares (2022) called “native-speakerism” (p. 2). Though implicit, the xenophobic undercurrents regarding who should and ought to do research and teach at research-intensive universities is both troubling and characteristic of a neoliberal university (Tavares, 2022).

The Point of Neoliberal Learning in the Report

The Boyer Report itself functioned in a constructive role, expressing a neoliberalist discourse and a technique of market governance supported by Public Choice Theory and dictating in what ways education is an economic good owed to the student consumers. As Foucault (1977/1980) would say, the report “play[ed] at once a conditioning and conditioned role” (p. 142). Education is valued in the report solely for its productive influence on students. Learning is not valued for its own sake; it is only useful when it creates and sustains the status quo. As the report says in quoting Massachusetts Institute of Technology President Charles Vest, “government funding of research in the universities is also an investment in the education of the next generation, with every dollar doing double duty, ‘a beautiful and efficient concept’” (The Boyer Commission, 1998, p. 10). Efficiency stands as a hallmark of neoliberal economics. Government funding sustains an economic, instrumental vision of undergraduate education prized for its appeal only insofar as it relates to The Boyer Report’s vision of an ideal educational model. The ideal education for these students, however, is devoid of student affairs. Any conception of a student as existing at the university for development outside of the classroom or alternate conceptions of students as anything other than participants in an academic capitalist marketplace (Rhoades & Slaughter, 2004; Taylor, 2020).



Effects and Implications for Student Affairs

The Boyer Report never mentions practitioners of student affairs or related synonyms, nor does it suggest opportunities for collaboration between faculty and student affairs; the vision appears limited to those on the ground doing the daily work of campus rather than higher-level leadership like Boards of Governors. The last recommendation in the report, “Cultivate a sense of community,” contained ideas for increasing a sense of campus belonging but without mentioning student affairs (The Boyer Commission, 1998, p. 34). Suggestions included forming small campus groups, creating and sustaining shared rituals, appreciating diversity, and connecting campus residents and commuter students (The Boyer Commission, 1998, p. 34-36). Though published in 1998, the report indicates that at this time faculty interests (The Boyer Commission) were served *by* student development rather than working side-by-side with student affairs practitioners (Doyle, 2004; Voyles, 2015). Faculty alone possess responsibility for undergraduate education.

This responsibility extends to academic advising and critiques improper advising practices. Claiming that bad advising is responsible for student disengagement, the authors write that most academic advising is perfunctory and pays insufficient attention to student needs, stating that “students who find that existing majors do not suit their interests often encounter discouraging barriers; advisors will likely first try to fit those interests into one of the existing patterns” (The Boyer Commission, 1998, p. 24). In the report, advising does not seem to be solely the purview of professional advisors – faculty who provide “routine suggestions about choice of courses” are also targeted for their lack of attention to individualized student concerns (The Boyer Commission, 1998, p. 24). Rather than presenting a vision of an integrated campus in which faculty work with student affairs, the exclusion of student affairs professionals from the narrative of campus change and undergraduate education silences and excludes those community members (Doyle, 2004).

A Foundational Document?

Despite the omission of student affairs from the document, The Boyer Report initially came to Saralyn’s attention because it was assigned reading in a first-semester, master’s level introductory course to College Student Personnel Administration. We read the report in the early weeks of the class along with other foundational philosophical documents for the field. The exclusion of student affairs from The Boyer Report supports Arcelus’ (2011) assertion that cultural misunderstandings about the role and purpose of faculty and student affairs abound and also hamper collaboration. If the high-ranking faculty, staff, and non-academic leaders who wrote the report do not see a place for student affairs in undergraduate education at research universities, why would the rank-and-file feel a need to work together? Without a perception of a common goal, faculty and student affairs may exist at cross-purposes at research universities. A possible solution is, as Arcelus (2011) suggested, a shared understanding that faculty and staff may hold undergraduate education in the highest regard and that the future may be faculty and student affairs working together to achieve that goal (Doyle, 2004, p. 76).

Conclusion

Upon its publication, The Boyer Report had a sensational effect on the national conversation about undergraduate education at research universities. Influenced by neoliberal economic thought—likely



implicitly—the report conceptualized undergraduate students as consumers who deserve to receive an appropriate financial return on their monetary investment. The report professes shock that these consumers have subsidized the work of the research university without adequate compensation. By focusing on neoliberal concepts of education as a consumable good, the report erases the role of student affairs professionals in undergraduate education. It sidelines both students who are not sufficiently prepared for their part in the contractual exchange of educational goods and services and the role of student affairs professionals in undergraduate education.

The Boyer Report redefines campus communities not as communal enterprises, but rather as a series of transactions. It positions students as both consumers and assets (McKinnon-Crowley, 2022). They are consumers who seek a product, pay for it, and expect delivery. They are assets in that they are financial targets for a university to recruit, maintain, and graduate. As consumers, universities then must streamline efficiencies to maximize economic benefit per consumer rather than tailor education to each individual student. As assets, universities must conceptualize students as a numerical benefit that can be resourced for partnerships in the community, with corporations, and for alumni and other stakeholders.

Further, the Boyer Report reduces classrooms to content delivery apparatuses, faculty as vessels for content delivery, student affairs to amenities, and student support and services into a process to keep students enrolled for the good of the university's numbers rather than students' unique educational needs. Though collaboration between faculty and student affairs in the pursuit of undergraduate education is possible, the report discursively silences the role of non-faculty members in achieving that aim—and minimizes the unique role of faculty individuality as well. We encourage institutions not to think of students as consumers or assets, but rather to think of the campus community in a holistic way. The field of student affairs ideally creates an environment that supports all students. The work takes shape and form in a multitude of ways that must be measured and understood through more lenses than just that of neoliberal capitalism.

Our aim in presenting this analysis of The Boyer Report is to illuminate the neoliberal underpinnings that have perpetuated a notion of student-as-consumer and quantitative-over-qualitative paradigm throughout higher education (McKinnon-Crowley, 2022). The Boyer Report can be read as illustrating a rulebook for a game of neoliberal comparison: faculty versus student affairs. In such a comparison game, student affairs cannot be fully valued because neoliberal discourse does not value student affairs. As institutions attempt to address neoliberal concerns, additional cuts, marginalization, and reduction will occur because the discursive environment will never position student affairs as a key component to education in a non-economic sense. Non-economic benefits will never be valued over economic ones in a neoliberal system. In order to address the discursive environment, we felt it necessary to analyze some of the key discursive nodes for neoliberal discourse in The Boyer Report so that student affairs professionals and other members of campus communities can better understand, adapt, and respond to changes in higher education to support all students.

Saralyn McKinnon-Crowley is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Baylor University and a UT Austin alumna (M.Ed. 2017; Ph.D. 2021). Her work investigates how individuals navigate and understand spaces not designed for them in higher



education and elsewhere. To date, that includes students, labor, and learning in the neoliberal academy, how gender operates in formal and informal settings, financial aid for low-income students, and community college transfer.

Aaron W. Voyles, M.F.A., Ed.D. is the Executive Director of Student Involvement and an Assistant Professor of Practice at The University of Texas at Austin. He also serves as an Assistant Professor of Practice at Virginia Commonwealth University and has held visiting faculty appointments at the University of Southern California and Appalachian State University. His research focuses primarily on Foucauldian discourse analysis, gender performativity, and scholar-practitioner discursive positionings.



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