Universities, Academic Careers, and the Valorization of ‘Shiny Things’

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Abstract

What is associated with a rise in academic career expectations, and why have levels risen to such levels wherein prominent dissatisfaction is a sustainably generated outcome? This paper examines work satisfaction among faculty in U.S. research universities. At a micro level, I discuss the career patterns of work satisfaction as found in a set of universities, drawing on data from qualitative studies of academic careers. I present findings on four analytic dimensions: the overall modal career patterns of professors, their overall work satisfaction, their work attitudes, and whether they would again pursue an academic career. The data capture variation in careers over time and the type of university in which they work. A prominent and pervasive pattern is transparent: that of ill-content and ill-institutional regard. At a macro level, these patterns are suggestively situated in developments in the social-institutional environment of U.S. higher education. This environment consists of systemic trends in which neoliberalism enables academic capitalism to flourish with its attendant effects in privatization and marketization. It is argued that a shift in organizational priority brought about by these conditions entails a “valorization of shiny things” – a valuing of market-related phenomena over knowledge of its own accord. This valorization, ritually supported by practices endemic of changed organizational culture, may weaken the ground on which the traditional scholarly role is played and may make precarious a basis for positive work sentiment.

Keywords

Careers, Satisfaction, Neoliberalism, Academic Capitalism, Markets

Citation


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of academics (professors specifically and intellectuals generally) to pursue their own enrichment and self-advancement at the expense of honest inquiry, unbiased research and dissemination of truth to their students and society. Such careerism has been criticized by thinkers from Socrates in ancient Athens to Russell Jacoby in the present.