Chapter 12
Professors in Transition: The Impact of Commodification and AI on Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores professors' evolving role in the increasing commodification of higher education and the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into academic environments. As universities adopt neoliberal policies and become more market-driven, professors are increasingly seen as service providers catering to student consumers rather than independent scholars and intellectual authorities. The rise of digital platforms, AI-driven learning tools, and open access to knowledge challenges the traditional gatekeeper role of professors, transforming how knowledge is created and disseminated. AI tools are often leveraged to optimize administrative processes and teaching outcomes. This chapter examines the implications of these changes for academic labor, intellectual autonomy, and the future of higher education, advocating for a reimagining of the professoriate as public intellectuals who can critically engage with AI and defend the university as a space for intellectual inquiry and the advancement of knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

The bedrock of higher education-academic freedom and shared governance faces ongoing challenges within the United States. Although not novel, recent incursions on tenure, academic freedom, and shared governance are alarming, as evidenced by legislative proposals and escalating corporate marketing encroach-

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-5102-5.ch012

ments upon universities (Alibasic et al., 2024). In response, this chapter delves into the repercussions of higher education's shift toward a corporatized model period of transition where traditional academic values are at odds with emergent commercial imperatives. This shift is redefining professors' traditional functions and challenging their historical role as gatekeepers of knowledge within an increasingly digitized academic ecosystem (Lange, 2015).

Historically, professors were entrusted with transmitting knowledge and forming future minds that will improve the life in its complexity and aspects (Labidi & Barhoumi, 2023). In today's current academic landscape, the increasing commodification of education and the integration of AI tools disrupt this traditional paradigm. Recent research highlights the complex interplay of market logic, efficiency, and social missions in universities. Studies show that higher education institutions follow systematic scaling patterns, with different sectors leveraging economies of scale to address distinct priorities (Taylor et al., 2019). The growing need for affordable and accessible higher education is a major global challenge for the 21st century. There is a need to develop a deeper understanding of the functionality and taxonomy of universities and colleges and, in particular, how their various characteristics change with size. Scaling has been a powerful tool for revealing systematic regularities in systems across a range of topics from physics and biology to cities, and for understanding the underlying principles of their organization and growth (Taylor, et al., 2019) While market-driven approaches are seen as fostering efficiency and quality, concerns arise about their impact on educational equity and social stratification (Mann, 2015). There is significance in understanding the sociological consequences of education driven by corporate/private ethos. Public research universities, facing reduced state funding, increasingly adopt market-oriented strategies to generate revenue. Institutions could potentially blend some industry-oriented principles and behaviors to bolster social goals, as reflected in their newer resource-centered organizational discourses and strategies (Warshaw & Upton, 2020). This reflects a broader trend in contemporary universities, where three logics of practice - intellectual advancement, market pursuit, and social inclusion - coexist and shape institutional development. Despite potential conflicts, these principles are ultimately compatible, influencing how universities pursue knowledge, market opportunities, and greater inclusivity (Brint, 2018).

The integration of AI in education is transforming traditional paradigms, offering personalized learning experiences, and enhancing accessibility to knowledge (Ram & Bhandari, 2023). AI-driven technologies are revolutionizing teaching methods, curriculum design, and assessment practices, enabling educators to provide more interactive and engaging learning environments (Benitta et al., 2024). These tools facilitate adaptive learning pathways, real-time data analysis, and AI-enhanced virtual tutoring, promoting independent learning and data-informed decision-making (Silva