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A Critical Discourse Analysis of the University of Houston's Mission Statement

In early 2011, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching recognized the University of Houston as Tier-One Research University (RU/VH).¹ In order to attain this designation, the University of Houston had to meet the following criteria: 1) at least 45 million dollars devoted to research (UH had 90 million dollars set aside for research in 2010); 2) 400 million dollars in endowments (UH secured 580 million dollars in endowments in 2011); 3) establishment of a Phi Beta Kappa chapter or membership in the American Research Libraries (ARL) association (UH was a member of the ARL); 4) at least 200 professional degree recipients per year (which UH had accomplished over the previous three years); 5) and at least five tenured or tenure-track faculty who were recognized as Nobel Prize winners or members of National Academies (Among UH faculty, there was one Noble Prize winner and five National Academy members in 2011) ("Tier One FAQs"). However, as stated in the same document, the Carnegie Foundation noted that freshman admissions and graduate programs at UH needed attention. According to another university statement posted online, "There is still unfinished business to solidify our place among nationally competitive research universities, including broadening our overall excellence and strengthening our performance and reputation for student success" ("Houston's Tier One University"). Besides the forward-looking tone of this statement, several words stand out: specifically, "excellence," "performance," and "reputation" seem to reflect values articulated in corporate mission statements. As will be seen below, several studies assess the ways in which corporate language influences higher education discourse in the era of globalization. On first impression, it would seem that, like other tertiary education institutions in the U.S. and the U.K., UH has adopted a corporate discourse as it refashions its image in the twenty-first century. In light of UH's recent achievement as a Carnegie Tier-One university, I

¹According to "Tier One FAQs," this abbreviation stands for "Research University with Very High Research Activity." This designation is the same as "Tier One" status, and it is the top designation for Research Universities. Besides UH, the other public research university in Texas that shares this distinction is Texas A&M. Another interesting statement worth considering is the following: "Because of these accomplishments, these universities enjoy a national 'brand,' recognition and prestige." This sentence articulates an important goal of obtaining Tier One status, because of how such an achievement increases national and perhaps international publicity for the university.

analyze how its current mission statement, a genre typically used in the corporate sector, mirrors the significant changes occurring at other similar public institutions. As part of my analysis, I also examine students' responses in *The Daily Cougar*, the student newspaper at UH, to the university's achievement. I draw upon the work of Bourdieu, Foucault and Blommaert to argue that, while the Mission Statement offers a unified narrative, the articles in the student newspaper reveal shifting relationships between local realities and external benchmarks at the national level.

Before taking a close look at UH's Mission Statement, however, I offer an overview of the critical work critiquing the corporatization of education. Norman Fairclough's groundbreaking study, in 1993, used critical discourse analysis to uncover the complexity of language use and the emergence of "promotional culture" as evidenced by public documents circulated at British universities. Through a systematic approach to critical discourse analysis emphasizing historical shifts, Fairclough examined the layered meanings of discursive documents, practices, and occurrences as well as structural aspects of culture and society. Crucially, he contended that, in the "post-traditional" society, one must work to demonstrate the value of traditional practices, acknowledge the diminished role of authority in relationships, and the increased role of reflexive approaches to the development of self-identity, which is no longer inherited (140). In 2004, Wesley Shumar argued that the "information economy," which has enabled the spread of newer technologies, has led to a decline in government intervention in economic crises. With regard to public institutions that have traditionally received support from public taxes, the result has been the withdrawal of government funds and the privatization of these organizations. According to this writer, public universities, which have experienced a steady decline in government funding, are seen as offering measurable products like four-year college diplomas that certify transferable skills (824). In Shumar's view, the structural changes at the global level may be seen in the devaluing of the cost of labor, while knowledge about the location of resources has the potential to influence future investments. Similarly, "information technology" has changed how people conceive of time and space; these technological advancements have enabled greater opportunities for communication and yet they have increased the flexible workforce (825-26). Bob Jessop, in his 2008 analysis of the role of "cultural political economy" in European and American universities traces the development of economic imaginaries in late-stage capitalism. Specifically, he demonstrates the extent to which systems of innovation at the national level have driven the development of the hegemony of Knowledge-Based Economy (KBE), in which the emphasis shifted from assessing future outcomes to the "*empirical description and quasi-prescriptive benchmarking* of central features of actually existing economies" (25; italics in original). Moreover, the emphasis on competition, knowledge applications, and transferable knowledge as well as the growth in intellectual property rights led to the imposition and reification of the KBE framework through benchmarks, buzzwords, and slogans. In arguing that, "The tightened connection between schooling, employment, productivity and trade is reflected in a cross-national reorientation of the notion of skill, with increasing emphasis on key skills, lifelong learning and employability" (31), Jessop suggests that the education system enables the hegemonic reach of the KBE as a consequence of the American government's policies concerned with competition from international economies.

Furthermore, accountability and oversight from external organizations now play a key role in defining how the quality of higher education should be measured. For example, in a recent conference panel on "The Idea of University," the historian Joan Scott noted the pervasiveness of accountability in universities in the U.K. and in the U.S. As she explains, in the 1980s, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher instituted the "Research Assessment Exercise," that is now the "Research Excellence Framework," and which was designed to measure the

performance of universities by using generic criteria. Scott worries about the ways in which the notion of “excellence” has been transformed, so that its meaning and attainment remain elusive. Scott critiques the ways in which the bureaucratization of universities, through the addition of more administrative positions, has led to internal oversight and a greater emphasis on learning outcomes. Perhaps echoing Fairclough’s observation about the effects of culture of consumerism on universities, Scott also recognizes the greater role of universities in providing “customer care” service to individual students.

While the long-term consequences of globalization on American universities remain contested, I now analyze how UH has adopted the genre of the corporate mission statement in order to attain recognition in a highly competitive market. I provide approximate dates of adoption, based on conversations that circulated in the *Daily Cougar*, in late 2006. As a result of using the search terms, “mission statement” and “UH Mission Statement,” I located an article dated November 3, 2006. The following is a revised version of the Mission Statement adopted in 2001:

The Mission of the University of Houston is to create and disseminate knowledge through the education of a diverse population of traditional and non-traditional students, and through research, artistic and scholarly endeavors, as it becomes the nation's premiere public urban university. In this role, the University of Houston applies its expertise to the challenges facing the local, state, national and global communities, and it establishes and nurtures relationships with community organizations, government agencies, public schools and the private sector to enhance the educational, economic and cultural vitality of Houston and Texas.

(Harmon)

Steven Craig, President of the Faculty Senate at the time, observed that, “A mission statement should be about the goals, and much of the verbosity in the UH mission statement is about process. The mission statement should be about the future, and ours (sounds) like it (is) about the past” (Harmon). As the article points out, the standing committee of the Faculty Senate, the UH Board of Regents, and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board reviewed and approved the revised Mission Statement that went into effect in 2007.

Here, I draw attention to words and phrases suggesting UH’s positionality: “create and disseminate knowledge”; “research”; “nation's premiere public urban university”; and “expertise.” These phrases suggest that UH is a key agent in contributing knowledge in a globalized era, especially because the institution is given personal qualities, as seen in the following phrases: “applies its expertise” and “establishing and nurturing relationships.” In their study analyzing the functions of university mission statements, Christopher Morphew and Matthew Hartley looked at more than 100 public and private universities in the U.S., in order to assess the impact of institution type and audience in determining how these statements are written. These writers contend that, “Public institutions are cognizant of their need to show their relevance to important external constituent groups, including taxpayers and legislators, as they compete for public funding with groups whose service to the local region is much more conspicuous” (468). Thus, we can see that UH’s 2006 Mission Statement not only announces to various stakeholders at the local level its commitment to education and service, but it also enunciates UH’s work for the common good. Addition, the nominalization of “education,” suggests that it is a product that can be transmitted. Furthermore, the historical context of globalization is subtly presented in the 2006 Mission Statement, through UH’s efforts to achieve national visibility as a leading institution for knowledge and research.

At ninety-one words, UH's current mission statement, adopted sometime after 2007, states:

The mission of the University of Houston is to offer nationally competitive and internationally recognized opportunities for learning, discovery and engagement to a diverse population of students in a real-world setting. The University of Houston offers a full range of degree programs at the baccalaureate, master's, doctoral and professional levels and pursues a broad agenda of research and creative activities. As a knowledge resource to the public, the university builds partnerships with other educational institutions, community organizations, government agencies, and the private sector to serve the region and impact the world. ("Our Mission Statement")

This version conveys the university's commitment to providing relevant education that will enable students to gain practical skills for when they enter the job market. The first sentence not only names the university as an agent, but it also emphasizes the institution's efforts to stand out from other similarly situated institutions in providing "opportunities" or services. In their landmark article analyzing the Mission Statements of Dana and Honeywell, John M. Swales and Priscilla S. Rogers, assert that these short statements speak to the organizations' credibility, culture, and beliefs. Specifically, according to the authors, "Genre-exemplars of this type have a ghostly immanence over and above the plethora of regulations, instructions and procedures" (226). While brief, UH's Mission Statement of 2007 thus articulates the institution's belief in education as transformative. The university aims not only to produce knowledge that will benefit local and global communities, but it also strives to connect with other public and private institutions, in order to benefit the city and the state.

If we compare the current Mission Statement to the one used before 2007, it is evident that the adjectives "traditional and non-traditional" to describe students are no longer used. Furthermore, there is now "a broad agenda of research and creative activities," rather than "research, scholarly, and artistic endeavors." Additionally, the Mission Statement mentions the range of degree programs that are available at UH, which is intended to communicate the services that are available to students. UH now is a "knowledge resource to the public," which announces its obligations to the public at large and thus clarifies its functionality. Whereas the 2006 Mission Statement announces the university's role in "establish[ing]" and "nurtur[ing] relationships" to benefit Houston and Texas, UH now "builds partnerships" "to serve the region and impact the world." These revisions, especially with regard to UH's agentive role, emphasize the importance of business connections, as evidenced by "partnerships." Also, whereas the previous Mission Statement embraces UH's local and national roles, the current version emphasizes the university's position as an important player in influencing events on a global scale. Gerlinde Mautner, in her analysis of how universities in Europe, Asia, and Africa use the word "entrepreneurial" to describe themselves and to explain their strategic plans, argues that this quality carries both positive and negative connotations in the socio-political environment of the twenty-first century. As opposed to another related word like "enterprising," Mautner points out that those who favor and oppose the closer relationship between business and higher education institutions use the word "entrepreneurial." Mautner's analysis suggests that both, opponents and supporters strongly argue for their views, but while businesses and university administrators continue to establish relationships, academics that decry these moves have not succeeded in enacting viable reforms (112), Mautner argues for a more localized approach to

dealing with what seems like an inevitable consequence of globalization.²

Ian Connell and Dariusz Galaziński, in a study analyzing how institutions of higher education in the U.K. have adopted corporate mission statement as a consequence of greater government oversight and dependence on business partnerships, suggest that these statements serve as attempts by the universities to negotiate their identity. Arguing that “[Mission Statements] are at their most certain when declaring what the missions are, expressing commitment or dedication, and declaring aims to be regarded as superlative” (476), Connell and Galaziński suggest seeing these statements as an adjustment to the political and ideological contexts. We can see that UH’s current Mission Statement acknowledges the challenging economic climate for which students must prepare, as evidenced by the indefinite verb “to offer” and its adverbial “nationally competitive and internationally recognized opportunities.” This first part of this sentence thus lets corporate stakeholders know that the university will use their resources to equip a “diverse population of students” with valuable skills. In the second sentence, the present tense action verb “offers” lets the audience know that UH provides degrees at the “baccalaureate, master's, doctoral and professional levels.” In the second part of the sentence, “pursues” is another similarly important action verb that enhances university’s self-presentation.

Another way to consider the implications of UH’s Mission Statement involves recognizing the institution’s efforts to assert its authority as a leader in higher education. Michel Foucault, in “Truth and Power,” argues that the “political economy of truth” is dependent on five factors. In other words, “truth” cannot exist independent of power. More particularly, Foucault contends that “truth” is allowed to exist because of universities, which institutionalize scientific research processes: “[Truth] is the object, under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption (circulating through apparatuses of education and information whose extent is relatively broad in the social body, notwithstanding certain strict limitations)” (73). Although the revised Mission Statement does not make overt claims about “truth,” it announces the university’s dedication to educating students in ways that will prepare them for the “real world.” The university, through the process of indoctrinating students, already has constituted an idea of what the real world is supposed to be like. The university’s devotion to research and to the dissemination of information further suggest that it is ideally suited to transmit “truth.” The short Mission Statement thus enables the university to enunciate its objectives. Furthermore, as Foucault points out, “[Truth] is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media)” (73). In the globalized environment of the twenty-first century, universities must adapt to

2In their analysis of research departments’ strategic plans, Gaffikin and Perry look at how “globalizing discourses” permeate U.S. institutions of higher education. Crucially, these writers see discourse as a discussion about current social processes (116-17). Specifically, they acknowledge the highly contested definition of globalization, asserting that its neoliberal framework would work optimally in a mixed economy welfare marked by privatization. Another way to look at the mixed economy welfare is that it allows for individual choice, the acquisition of private property, and a degree of communal involvement. According to these writers, the privatization of public institutions should be considered alongside other equally important social developments, “civic engagement” and “diversity.” They argue that more research is needed in analyzing specific cases of how these discourses are transformed from strategic plans into actions (138).

changing political and economic conditions in order to survive. Their power no longer comes from within but must depend on external authorities, as evidenced by UH's efforts to obtain Tier One designation. This search for external approval demonstrates the critical need to establish and maintain the university's reputation as a transmitter of truth and knowledge.

In analyzing UH's new Mission Statement in relation to the knowledge based economy of the twenty-first century, I argue that it is prudent to look at other types of data, including articles appearing in the student newspaper as well as university press releases. I set out to gauge how students have responded to UH's designation. To do so, I visited *The Cougar Online* site and searched the archives by using the following search terms, "working students" and "working class students."³ In my research of the newspaper archives, I came across headlines from 2006, like the following: "Students Enroll but Don't Graduate." In 2012, several articles in the student newspaper expressed concerns about retention and increased tuition costs. Here, I discuss two articles as examples of the undercurrent of issues that the university faces. The first article addresses the difficulties that UH students face as commuters, who also have families to support and full-time jobs to which they are committed. At the start of the fall semester, in 2012, President and Chancellor Khator noted that, in comparison to UT and Texas A&M, UH's graduation rates are low. The figures indicated that, after four years, 16.5 percent of students graduate; and, after six years, 47.5 percent graduated. The article reported Executive Director of Media Relations Richard Bonnin's statement that, "(The graduation rate) is not surprising, as many of these students have the additional responsibilities of raising a family and are taking courses while working to pay for college or while fulfilling active military duty requirements" (Heffler). The article discusses "high-impact practices," like learning communities, as a way to help students stay focused. Compared to other nonresidential public universities where eighteen percent of students are part of learning communities, only thirteen percent of students at UH are involved in such communities. In another article published the same day, we are reminded of UH's history, especially because of Hugh Roy Cullen's interest in providing working students with a university education. According to the article discussing how the university is making an effort to help lower income students with their finances through loans and other types of financial aid, Jon Lawrence, Associate Professor of Sociology stated that, "The (University) was founded for the children of middle-class workers. The tradition lives on today. The overwhelming majority of students come from lower middle class and working-class families" (Resendiz). In both of these articles, we can see how UH's narrative as a commuter college or as a working-class university is repeated by different members of the community, an administrator and an academic.

³Information about the university's beginnings may be obtained on its website, under "Our History and Traditions," which leads to a short video, *The University of Houston: War and Growth, 1939-1950*, a UH Memories Project. As its title suggests, this video offers an overview of the early decades of the university, from its inauguration of the current campus in 1939. Viewers learn that Hugh Roy Cullen, an oil executive, supported the construction of the Roy Cullen Building (named in memory of his only son who died in an accident and now the current site of the English Department), with the following request: "The University of Houston must always be a college for working men and women and their sons and daughters" (*The University of Houston*).

In the last part of this essay, after discussing UH's Mission Statements and students' writings in *The Daily Cougar*, I focus on public statements from university administrators as another way of perceiving the institution's changing identity. In these press releases, university officials argue that the Carnegie Designation will lead to financial gains for the institution and the city of Houston. For example, the university's designation has confirmed its "excellence," and it has generated substantial economic benefits for the city and state. Each year, UH generates over three billion dollars for the city ("Houston's Tier One University"). The following statement, containing the imperative word "must," not only closely ties the university to the city, but it also clarifies the larger goals of the university: "As Houston's namesake university we must keep pace with the momentum of the city" ("Houston's Tier One University"). Just as the city has experienced growth, so has the university. Furthermore, in another early press release in which the president and chancellor of the university was asked about the significance of the designation, "[President Renu] Khator said the Carnegie designation will bring greater visibility to Houston and will lead to more economic development for the region and sustained research productivity from UH" (Bonnin). Again, as reported, this statement stands out because it focuses on the university's reputation as well as emphasizing greater economic opportunities for the university and the surrounding area. Indeed, it would be very difficult to argue against these changes, which, on first impression seem to suggest that everyone who is associated with UH will benefit. Indeed, one may ask what enables the anonymous press release and President Khator's statement remain powerful reminders of the university's excellence. Pierre Bourdieu, in "Price Formation and the Anticipation of Profits," offers a response that is worth considering, especially because of the ways in which one's professional qualifications influence the message that is being communicated. Bourdieu suggests that the close relationship between the speaker and the message have linguistic value: "The relations of power that obtain in the linguistic market, and whose variations determine the variations in the price that the same discourse may receive on different markets, are manifested and realized in the fact that certain agents are incapable of applying to the linguistic products offered . . . the criteria that are most favourable to their own products" (69). UH President Khator's reported statement above means something because she is not only making a comment on the university's Carnegie designation, but she is also representing the university in her official capacity.

Perhaps it is not just status of the person making a statement that matters, but there are many other factors that determine the effects of a public statement. Specifically, the press release containing Dr. Khator's comments was circulated at the beginning of the semester, so that the university community would be more likely to pay attention to the unfolding events. As Dr. Khator noted, "Our students – who today begin a new semester with this incredible news – can say with pride they are getting a Tier One education. They will finally be able to take their diplomas and say 'I have graduated from a Carnegie Tier One university'" (Bonnin). These statements capture the UH President's message about the value of a Tier One university diploma which students can use to secure a better future. According to Bourdieu, "Since linguistic signs are also goods destined to be given a price by powers capable of providing credit (varying according to the laws of the market on which they are placed), linguistic production is inevitably affected by the anticipation of market sanctions" (77). If we consider the impact of Dr. Khator's statement on her intended audiences (students, administrators, and parents), we can begin to see that her words give credibility to the university; and they also suggest that she is mindful of her audiences' needs. On the one hand, the president must appeal to students' practical objective in attaining a college degree—in order to be gainfully employed. On the other hand, her words are intended to reassure parents that the money they have invested in their children's education will

yield positive results. Also implicit in the president's statements is the university's reputation as a leading research institution.

If we consider the historical narrative surrounding UH, that it has always been a university for the workingmen and women of Houston, it is necessary to ask if this is still true, today. And, moreover, it is crucial to address how one's historical distance affects one's interpretation of UH's narrative. Jan Blommaert, in his discussion of the complex layers of history, argues that, "Applying the categories of today to discourses that display categorisations belonging to another regime -- another archive, in Foucault's terms -- results in an anachronism, an operation structurally similar to the refusal to grant transcontextual mobility to discourse organised on the basis of different orders of indexicality" (130). In other words, Blommaert is cautioning researchers to acknowledge the historical moment from which they are approaching a problem that has been similarly altered by the passage of time. Just as discourse changes as a result of the context in which it occurs, so does our grasp of historical events. Indeed, in analyzing the impact of globalization on higher education in general and UH in particular, I believe that the narrative of the "working class students," (whatever the realities of today) continues to linger in certain genres and contexts because it is part of UH's history and self-presentation which, in turn, are deeply connected to the city of Houston. Moreover, one cannot ignore the history of institutionalized segregation that permeated all aspects of society, for the greater part of the twentieth century. Further analysis of UH's changing identity will need to address how the university responded to a growing and diverse population of students. Similarly, it will be necessary to study the extent to which academics within the university have worked to address managerialist discourses from the administration.

In this undertaking, I have attempted to uncover the main arguments concerning the influence of neoliberal ideology in institutions of higher learning. While a number of writers like Fairclough, Jessop, Shumar and Scott worry that universities have been overtaken by neoliberal hegemonies of power, which have resulted in greater accountability measures and corporate oversight, other writers like Mautner as well as Gaffikin and Perry argue that more research is needed to assess how institutions been transformed. If the corporate mission statement were an indicator of the close relationship between universities and business entities, it would seem that UH, as a Tier One university, has taken on a corporate discourse to solidify its reputation. In these transformative moments, I argue that Bourdieu, Foucault, and Blommaert can offer viable ways of analyzing language, power, and history, which can lead to a more nuanced understanding of an institution's self-presentation.

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