

THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE ON LINKEDIN: STUDENT ACTIVISM AND NEOLIBERALISM

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It was the Multicultural Scholars Program that convinced me to commit to Penn. Specifically, it was a student representative from the Student Labor Action Project (SLAP), who was featured on a panel to discuss student life, during which they openly critiqued University labor practices to an auditorium of a hundred students. I was stunned but impressed — I thought if the University let themselves be openly berated at an *admissions* event, they must foster not only an extraordinary dedication to civic engagement and activism, but a deeper commitment to justice, truth, and equality no matter the hit to their reputation, and I deeply admired that.

One year later, I'm more skeptical. I spent the 2019-2020 school year pursuing institutional positions where I thought I could enact change: I served on student advisory boards in Civic House, worked at the Netter Center as a Silverman Fellow, and volunteered at a local tutoring center through an ABCS course. All of these measures were listed as part of Dr. Amy Gutmann's university-wide announcement to renew Penn's dedication to civic engagement — they were also used as a justification against paying PILOTs (Payments In Lieu Of Taxes).

I speak as a member of Civic House and the Netter Center when I say that not only are these measures inadequate, but activist work adjacent to the university serves ulterior purposes: the accumulation of social capital through the marketability of civically-minded students, and the deradicalization of student action by forcing them to operate within a neoliberal framework. All self-proclaimed student activists must reject this framework, and advocate for policies like PILOTs that give power directly back to the Philadelphia community.

Penn Today ends every email with a Benjamin Franklin quote: "The noblest question in the world is: what good may I do in it?" But Penn's determination of what is "good" and "noble" often depends on what is marketable. University funding and recognition dictate what action students are allowed to engage in. Students serving as tutors and voter registrars are rewarded positions and publicity for their efforts in the fight against injustice, but organizers in the Coalition Against Fraternity Sexual Assault (CAFSA) or Police Free Penn are met with villainization, condescension, and even threats to their safety or academic standing. In this way, Penn polishes their reputation as a civically engaged institution while discouraging radical action.

Some students claim university adjacency is a necessary evil. After all, Penn can be generous with its endowment, and this funding means that students can volunteer and work in West Philadelphia's high schools, food banks, and legal aid centers. But this adjacency also results in deradicalization, bringing students back into the embrace of neoliberal reform. In *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, Adjoa Florência Jones de Almeida says that corporate funding ensures that activists "are no longer accountable to [their] constituents... [they're] primarily accountable to public and private foundations as [they] try to prove to them that [they] are still relevant and efficient and worthy of funding" (p. 186). Radical beliefs are filtered out of mission statements, and community members are often dehumanized to become palatable, flattened into "trauma porn" for grant proposals or funding applications.

Students working through the institution do valuable work, and although these institutions solve short-term problems, they obscure the fact that Penn is the perpetrator (or at the very least the perpetuator) of the original long-term issues. Through a culture of neoliberalism, students are taught to make their volunteerism a ladder rather than a bridge.

I refuse to accept this as our reality, and I refuse to be used as an excuse to deny material support to West Philadelphia. Every civically engaged student must commit to de-centering themselves as an "activist" and instead lift up the voices of the community they claim to serve. By naming the Civic House, the Netter Center, the Penn Alexander School, the SNF Paideia Fellowship, the Fox Leadership Program, and ABCS courses, Dr. Amy Gutmann has made us complicit in an agenda we must oppose. Organizers in West Philadelphia demand that Penn pay PILOTs, and if we're about the fight for more than an entry on LinkedIn, it is our responsibility to join them.

Ollie Kim Dupuy is a student at the University of Pennsylvania pursuing a B.A. in Urban Studies, Class of 2023. They are interested in research that explores the tool of counter-storytelling in a fight against the function of despair as white supremacy.

References:

Jones de Almeida, A. F. (2017). Radical Social Change: Searching for a New Foundation. In *The revolution will not be funded: Beyond the non-profit industrial complex* (p. 186). Durham: Duke University Press.

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