

Amazing Opportunities Await: Liberal Mythologies at a Non-Selective University

IMAGINE A PHOTOGRAPH OF A BLACK MAN IN A SUIT, CAUGHT IN MID-LEAP, ARMS outstretched, mouth open, and eyes looking skyward. Underneath the image are the words:

2005 . . . You are not going to be the same as 2004, the same as 2003. I'm not going to watch you slip away from my apartment window, my seat on the subway, my spot on the stoop. You're the year I'm going to embrace, the year I'm going to focus on my future, converge on my career, celebrate my passions. I welcome you, 2005. Where I go this year is up to me and when I get there, 2006 will welcome me. I want to start now.

This is an advertisement on the New York subway for one of the city's many non-selective colleges. Underneath this text is the name of the institution along with a description of the college as a place where "amazing opportunities await." There are several versions of the ad, all of them featuring people of color. One includes an image of a woman walking down a sandy beach that disappears into the horizon, and in another, a woman sits on a cliff looking out over the ocean.

This advertisement is not selling a traditional college education or even training in the kinds of skills that might make a graduate more employable. This advertisement is selling the American Dream. The target audience is clearly people who live in apartments, ride the subway, hang out on stoops, and nurse uncelebrated passions. The photos that accompany the ad campaign further specify the intended audience. Another version of the ad features a photograph of an infant and the headline: "he just received the best New Year's gift, a parent with an education and a career." The power of these ads is in strong, active verbs such as "focus," "converge," "embrace," and "celebrate," and in their insistence that success is the result of "focused" individuals taking action to improve their families' circumstances. The tagline: "where I go in 2005 is up to me" is suggestive of the ideology deployed through such rhetoric: effort creates its own opportunities and success awaits those who are willing to summon enough character to take a step towards that distant horizon.

Unlike selective institutions where children of professionals are educated to assume their own place in the social hierarchy, non-selective colleges and universities cannot create

an identity, shape a marketing strategy, and attract students based on claims to status and prestige. Nor can they make grand claims about their students' job prospects after graduation since graduates from non-selective institutions must compete with graduates from more prestigious colleges in a tight job market. Non-selective institutions must nevertheless forge

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an institutional identity that is attractive to student-customers. Slick advertising campaigns seek to appeal to potential students by taking advantage of the anxieties of dead-end jobs, low pay, and unemployment and by placing the blame for those anxieties on those afflicted: *if 'amazing opportunities await,' these ads seem to say, you have no one to blame but yourself for not 'focusing' and 'converging' on your 'passions.'* Institutions like the one in the ad market American Dream mythology by portraying themselves as providers of upward mobility to those meritorious and deserving few.

Advertising campaigns, though perhaps the most explicit, are not the only ways that non-selective institutions forge an identity and develop a recruitment strat-

egy. This article presents a case study of the self-representation/marketing apparatus that one institution employs to recruit the working-class students of color who make up the majority of its student body. One claim of this essay is that in non-selective colleges and universities, marketing and self-representation are often indistinguishable and that the discursive alliance between recruitment and self-definition can be read as the dominant narrative of non-selective admissions policies. To the degree that these narratives participate in and reinforce liberal mythologies of achievement and failure, they deny the reality of institutionally structured failure in higher education and protect institutions from the kind of scrutiny that might illuminate the role that non-selective colleges and universities play in a highly regulated arena of access and exclusion. For Roland Barthes, myth names the form that dominant ideologies take as soon as they come to be perceived as natural, unquestioned, and uncontested. Barthes' work on how sign systems become myths, is thus a useful method in examining how myths operate in the daily, lived experience of teachers and students.

Rhetoric and Ideology: A Case Study

I take the New York subway to a private, non-selective college where I teach Composition and work in the campus writing center. At the Brooklyn Campus of Long Island University, 46% of students identify as Black, 15% as Hispanic, and 20% as white. The average income of these students families is about \$31,000, less than half the average of families at LIU's sister campus, located in a Long Island suburb. At \$651.00 per credit hour, tuition is twice the cost of tuition at the City University of New York. Ninety-three percent of LIU students rely at least, in part, on financial aid.¹ Each day as I emerge from the subway on my way to work, after having been inundated by ads for the transformative power of mass higher education, I am greeted by a giant billboard advertising my own campus. Against a white background, half a dozen hands, some black, some brown, are reaching upward, trying to grasp something just out of reach. The ad reads: together we can change the world.

Soon after I started teaching and tutoring at LIU, I noticed that students often disappear. One semester I tutored Shatiqua, a Black woman from Brooklyn and a new high school graduate. She was starting out in LIU's basic writing program because she had performed poorly on the one-shot writing placement test that the college administers to all new students. At the end of the semester, Shatiqua and I made plans to work together the following semester. But I never saw her again. Brenda, a Latina, was in my basic writing class. She became the subject of some research I conducted on literacy narratives. A single mother in her thirties, Brenda was trying to give her children the "educated parent with a career" promised in the subway ads. She was holding down a job, raising her two daughters, and attending school full-time. I stayed in touch with her for two years before she, too, disappeared. When I was finally able to reach her by phone, she told me that she had dropped out for what she hoped would be a temporary period of readjustment. After working all day and coming home to cook dinner for her girls, she was simply "too exhausted" to do her homework. She had failed several classes and hated to see her tuition money wasted. She told me that she hopes to return to school when she can be more focused.²

Stories like these are common at LIU. Statistics for the 2002–2003 academic year list the retention rate—the number of students who return for their sophomore year—at 29% and the six-year graduation rate at 21%. Behind these numbers are the stories of people like Sha-

1. The vast majority of students who graduate from LIU take more than four years to complete their degrees. At this tuition rate, most of these students will owe more than \$50,000 after six years of study.

2. As federal and state aid is reduced, more students must bear more of the cost of a college degree. These burdens fall hardest on low-income students. See the NCES (nces.ed.gov) report "The Debt Burden of College Graduates" as well as the December 23, 2004, *New York Times* article "Students to Bear More of the Cost of College."

tiqua and Brenda,³ who wanted to go to college and ran into difficulties along the way. Since LIU does not keep adequate records once students are no longer enrolled, it is difficult to tell whether most students drop out for good, transfer to other institutions, or eventually return to LIU to complete their degrees. Nevertheless, *U.S. News and World Report* cited these statistics when it ranked LIU as a fourth tier university, the bottom rung, in the Northeast region. Questions about the value of this kind of ranking notwithstanding, LIU's reputation as an institution of higher learning has never been strong. Yet, troubling numbers like these have had a curious effect on enrollment at LIU: it has increased. The 2003–2004 academic year saw the largest total enrollment in ten years. The success of LIU in recruiting students despite appalling levels of student failure can be measured in how effectively the institution represents itself as a site where “amazing opportunities await” the deserving and dedicated.

LIU's Mission Statement and Liberation Mythology

Evidence of LIU's ideological relationship to its students (and faculty) is located in the discursive apparatus through which the university articulates its mission and asserts an institutional identity. The university's position on matters of retention and graduation can be found in LIU's “Mission” and “Presidential Vision” statements. I call these “public texts” because they are available on the university website and are widely distributed in promotional and recruitment material for the campus. These texts are evidence of a liberal mythology that serves as the basis for the development of recruitment strategies as well as for constructions of institutional identity.

LIU's public texts work within and shore up an institutional mythology of student preparedness and student progress that places “liberation” at the center of institutional discourse. The university's utopian “Vision” and “Mission” statements participate in and reinforce nationalistic narratives of belonging and possibility like the mythology of the American Dream and the related mythology of individual achievement in the face of near-impossible odds. The ideology that informs LIU's public representations provides a glimpse into the relationship between non-selective institutions of higher learning and subject formation. These self-representations are articulated within state-sanctioned meritocratic myths about equality and opportunity in America.

3. In 2003–2004, 72% percent of LIU students were women. Several other non-selective colleges in the New York area also have a largely female student body. At LIU, most students major in one of many “professional” programs on campus such as Nursing, Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Pharmacy, or Education. This suggests that, despite mass higher education, a traditional liberal arts degree is still the bastion of white, middle- and upper-class privilege. Working-class women of color, especially those with children, are more likely to choose a major in response to the pressure to earn a living in a tight labor market. Traditional gender roles also ensure that any job caring for others is still considered women's work.

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes defines myth as “depoliticized speech” that functions to make “contingency appear eternal . . . [Myth] has turned [reality] inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature” (142). LIU’s Campus Mission empties reality of history by claiming that the institution began with a mission that is still its driving force today. In other words, LIU turns the historical circumstances that facilitated the opening of the campus and informed its inaugural mission into nature by proclaiming the idealized, depoliticized value of those initial commitments. The LIU Mission begins:

Expressed in its still-relevant motto *Urbi et Orbi*, the mission of LIU since 1926 has been to open the doors of the city and the world to men and women of all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds who wish to achieve the satisfaction of the educated life and to serve the public good. Its mission is to awaken, enlighten and expand the minds of its students.

Since LIU’s Mission is “still relevant” after eighty years, it is emptied of its historical contingency. It becomes a universally acknowledged force for “the public good” and the theological inflection in the word “mission” is brought to the surface. LIU’s liberatory mission, rather than an explanation or a justification of daily practices, becomes self-evident and a thing in itself.

The concept of “liberation” also resonates in LIU’s description of its origin, a foundation narrative that naturalizes an elite interpretation of history. In LIU’s version of events, the school is a neutral site that facilitates upward mobility for students from “all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds,” or at least for those who can afford—or borrow the money—to pay tuition. The campus’s mythical origin reinscribes power relations by rhetorically positioning students as the beneficiaries of the school’s commitment to education despite the historically situated realities that shape the lives of students like Shatiqua and Brenda. The Mission statement is a performance of the institution’s power to impose its foundation narrative as an ultimate truth in the face of the failure of the vast majority of its students.

But has LIU failed? The institution sets up the terms of student progress and success according to the essentialized values expressed in its Mission. The 360-word Mission refers to

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LIU's "diverse" student body no fewer than 10 times. The university defines these students as follows: students from "all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds," students from "urban backgrounds," students who are "new to America and new to the English language," students with varied "cultural, ethnic, religious, racial, sexual" identities. LIU's reiteration of its commitment to "diversity" elides the social constructedness of the term by implying that middle-class white people are the unmarked (unraced, middle-class, and male) norm. The university's Mission participates in the American mythology of equality and opportunity and Horace Mann's nineteenth century mythology of education as "the great equalizer" by highlighting its commitment to providing access to the "American Dream" to a non-traditional student population. The power of the institution's rhetoric is thus in the alliance between LIU's foundation narrative and American "bootstrap" mythologies. Such mythologies posit failure as an individual rather than an institutional affair.

That LIU's institutional discourse mirrors nationalistic narratives of equality and individualism becomes even more clear when a close reading reveals that the Mission language further naturalizes the meritocratic mythology in which the university is primarily invested. Nowhere does LIU speak of its "oppressed" or "working-class" students; no public texts speak of the school's commitment to what Barthes calls "proletarian culture" or "proletarian art" or language (139); the Mission does not declare its willingness to educate "students from New York's urban ghettos" because in LIU's signification of reality, success is primarily a matter of personal choice that transcends race or class oppression. The dissemination of such a mythology is crucial in an institution with a record number of students, most of whom will leave college before graduation.

The LIU Mission thus evokes the supreme contradiction upon which the university's identity is precariously balanced: the naturalization of the concept of "diversity" as a term to ascribe value to characteristics held by different groups and a reification of the concept of individualism as an essential component of American mythology. The LIU website boasts of its commitment to "access and excellence," a paradoxical position in which everyone is welcome but only the smartest and most dedicated will succeed. This rhetoric places the burden of failure on the students themselves instead of the institution that rewards only according to ability. The Presidential Vision Statement extends this contradiction by boasting its record as a place for a "nationally competitive" student body as well as other highly motivated students who yearn to make a difference for themselves and their communities but whose potential has yet to be realized. It must be our sacred obligation to create in all those who come to this great University, regardless of their prior preparation, a capacity for and a commitment to academic excellence, individual achievement, personal growth, cultural enrichment, and civic responsibility.

Barthes writes that "language is not expected to represent reality, but to signify it" (137). LIU's Mission does not merely describe the kind of education the institution offers its students; it imposes a political reality on students and faculty. The LIU Mission claims an institutional goal for itself by signifying a socially constructed and politically expedient idea of America as a diverse collective made up of equally valued individuals who each have access to opportunity but succeed (or fail) according to personal "motivation" and "individual achievement." The LIU Mission describes students in the passive voice, as people whose potential "has yet to be realized." Yet LIU's "sacred obligation" to its students is described using the strong, active verb: "to create." This rhetoric implies that education is something that is done *to* students *by* the institution and its agents. Students are rhetorically stripped of agency as they pass through the gates of the institution to be liberated.

The "Mission" template is uprooted from narratives of nationalism and imposed upon the LIU student body and faculty as a governing principle. The university solidly positions itself in the role of providing the euphemistically labeled "unprepared" with access to the university *at the same time* that it participates in the meritocratic project of culling from the masses a tiny academic elite who will be *created* anew as cultural and civic leaders.

The LIU mythology also facilitates an ideology in which getting a good job and becoming enlightened are interdependent. The university is one of the few institutions in society that claims to provide people with economic, social, and a kind of spiritual upward mobility. The Mission's goal to "awaken, enlighten and expand the minds of its students" is deeply connected to what Barthes calls "bourgeois ideology" in Western culture. This ideology "spreads over everything" (139); it is so pervasive as to be invisible and thus unnameable. LIU aligns itself with an Arnoldian perspective of culture in which the job of educational institutions is to liberate minds and deliver willing students from darkness into light. This progression is conflated in LIU mythology with the kind of job training that working-class students so desperately want. James Berlin, in *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, suggests that this kind of rhetoric is a result of the decreasing economic value of a college degree: "In a post-Fordist environment, a college degree no longer ensures a secure job and a comfortable way of life. It is more likely instead to be no more than a certificate qualifying a graduate to compete for one of the comfortable positions at the center of the job circle" (50). If a college degree, especially one from a fourth-tier institution, is not a ticket to economic security as it perhaps once was, the institution must offer students more symbolic rewards such as "enlightenment" and a sense of accomplishment that are not necessarily accompanied by economic advantage. An emphasis on helping deserving students from "diverse" communities earn college degrees has turned into a statement about the kind of people the Great University creates, a subject formation most accurately signified as *citizen*. The LIU Mission is

rhetorically effective like the subway advertisements are effective in that they signify ideas that are already in wide circulation in the larger culture: people succeed or fail largely on their own merits, and a college education offers far more than money—it offers intelligence and self-respect.

LIU's Presidential Vision Statement and the Myth of Meritocracy

LIU's Presidential Vision statement is perhaps the best example of this mythology. It draws specifically on nationalistic narratives of equality, opportunity, and individualism by invoking key phrases such as "sacred obligation," "individual achievement," and "cultural enrichment." The statement further affirms that "this special vision . . . has existed from our origins." The Vision's foundation narrative is closely aligned with popular narratives of the origins of the United States as an egalitarian alternative to Britain's class-stratified society. The Presidential Vision statement represents the institution as a site where the ideals of the institution dovetail with the democratic values that make America the "land of opportunity."

To represent itself as egalitarian in the midst of what would by any other terms be a crisis of student failure, LIU foregrounds its commitment to students "regardless of their prior preparation." The university's non-selective policy is a key component in the precarious balance that the university must maintain to keep its identity (and its recruitment strategy) intact. The Vision's language thus makes it clear that LIU is ideologically committed to liberal notions of what a university is supposed to do: assimilate the meritorious into high culture (or at the very least train them for middle-class professions) and *create* a belief in the value of that culture in everyone else. This meritocratic goal is essential to a mythology of the American Dream that naturalizes the dominance of a tiny elite. The irony is that as the university proclaims its willingness to lend a helping hand to the underprivileged, it must ignore the history of racism and class-stratification that serves as the basis for liberal commitments to open access.

In American Dream mythology, students who fail to earn their degrees may have succeeded according to the logic of a meritocracy. "Success" in these terms is measured by how well these students are interpellated into a subjectivity that sees individual effort and ability as the primary paths to achievement. This interpellation, at the very least, ensures that the myth will thrive despite and even because of socioeconomic inequality. In other words, students who drop out before graduation may have succeeded at taking the university's Mission to heart: to fail at a school that is committed to educating and liberating everyone "regardless of their prior preparation" is to be unworthy of the meritocracy's promise.

The success of that discourse in shaping reality for LIU students is one possible reason why an institution that almost none of its students can afford to attend maintains a 21 % graduation rate without suffering a crisis of identity (or a financial one) or without having to answer to those students it fails.⁴

How might teachers in non-selective colleges like LIU resist the mythologies that prop up the status quo? One option includes the development of a critical pedagogy that encourages students to explore the ways these institutions market themselves to people like them. In *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, Ira Shor argues that the task of critical teachers is to encourage students to “*extraordinarily reexperience the ordinary*” (93). Teachers could design a series of assignments problem-posing marketing and recruitment efforts at non-selective institutions. For example, most LIU students ride the subway or bus as their primary means of transportation. I might ask students to take special notice of the advertisements for colleges and universities on their ride to school including the headlines, text, and any images that accompany the ad. As an in-class group assignment, I might ask students to compare their data and come up with the top five schools whose ads appear most often. Once these schools have been identified, students can begin to ask: why are these schools and not others advertised on public transportation? Who does the audience for these ads seem to be and why? How do these schools market themselves to potential student-customers? What are the dominant themes driving the ads? What explicit and implicit messages about education and upward mobility are these ads sending? How do those messages mirror “bootstrap” mythologies in American culture? Are those myths compatible with the material realities of non-traditional students’ experience? Finally, students could create their own advertisements depicting the relationship between schooling and upward mobility from their point of view. Encouraging students to explore these questions could part of an ongoing effort by compositionists to teach students to read the institution’s own language as myth and then ask: who do those myths serve?⁵

While the pedagogical response to dominant mythologies at non-selective institutions is one way to push back against institutional efforts to shape reality, it does not fully address how we, as teachers and professionals, are implicated in institutional rhetoric. To examine institutional self-representations is not to step back and observe but to acknowledge that we are always working from within the structures that reproduce the system we set out

4. A search of collegeresults.org suggests that when it comes to low graduation rates, LIU is not alone. Of 15 schools nationwide with a majority of working class and/or students of color, six had graduation rates under 20% and only two had rates over 50%.

5. See Reichert Powell for another analysis of the perpetuation of dominant mythologies in institutional discourse.

to critique. Becoming a reader of these myths enabled me to view my own complicity in a system that perpetuates inequality by naturalizing it. If asserted uncritically, commitments to “equality in education” or “democratic access to college,” keystones of much of the rhetoric of educational reform, can begin to mirror liberal mythologies that elide the material realities of white supremacy, class-stratification, and gender oppression. It is not only students who are assigned a disempowering subjectivity in such a discourse. In a world where non-traditional students are constructed as consumers of educational products, teachers are represented as little more than the retailers of symbolic rewards whose “liberatory” promise is steeped in a discourse that functions to maintain hegemony. As teachers and scholars in non-selective institutions, it is important to remember that students are not the only ones producing texts that deserve our attention. Our work should debunk the ideological systems that reproduce inequality *and* enable us to confront the myth of our own good intentions.

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