IT’S hard to know what to make of Tim Jansa and William J. Nichols’s well-meaning but ultimately wrong-headed article in this issue. We certainly have some important points of agreement: corporate-speak has made major inroads in higher education administration, compromising the self- and shared-governance model essential to academic institutions; we are facing an educational climate in which the learning of languages for purposes other than being able to teach them is derogated; language departments have not done a good job of integrating the implications of the growth of bi- or multilingual students in their classrooms; state legislatures and governorships, especially but not only those controlled by the Republican party, have gutted foreign language requirements and pooh-poohed any kind of commitment to transnational cultural competencies that are not primarily instrumental. In addition, I can’t disagree with their argument that it’s up to language departments to “defend the utility of what we do vis-à-vis skeptical presidents, vice presidents, provosts, associate provosts, deans, associate deans, and other higher education leaders.”

But I was not convinced by their central argument that since “neoliberal pressures in higher education and the institutional responses they engender have become a universal new reality whose ideological underpinnings are now firmly entrenched in the enterprise of academia. . . . [p]ostsecondary world language leaders must learn to adapt to the neoliberal paradigm—or risk further diminishing the stature of our field.” For Jansa and Nichols, that primarily means acquiescing to the “new reality” that “market-driven forces of a neoliberal agenda now command virtually all aspects and strata of institutions of higher learning,” acknowledging that the fight against the representation of students as customers and consumers has already been lost and that the concept of education as a public good is as old a chestnut as tweed jackets with elbow patches. Ultimately, they want to convince their readers that since we haven’t been able to beat the corporatization of higher education and the wholesale adoption by administrators of the lexicon of “stakeholders,” “data-driven decision making,” and “incentivizing,” we should just join them. We’re language specialists, they say—let’s learn the new language of managerialism!

Although Jansa and Nichols characterize faculty resistance to this mode of seeing the university as “cynical,” I’d argue that their own approach encourages cynicism instead of dispelling it. They seem to be urging language faculty members to learn the grammar and vocabulary of neoliberalism for purely instrumental reasons, “to understand what our leaders expect of faculty and academic units, what they value, and what their vision is for the university or college.” By parroting the corporatist word list, departments can “rebrand” themselves as forward-looking, strategic, and efficient.

But as students of language, we know that language is not static or removed from lived experience. The language of managerialism undergirds the economic and political logic of neoliberalism, which is far more than just a way to rethink higher
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Education. Neoliberalism is a significant cause of the situation in which language study in particular and the humanities in general find themselves. One major article of faith of neoliberalism is that private enterprise and entrepreneurialism are always superior to government action; another is that accountability and achievement are measurable and that those qualities attach to individual units, be they people, classes, departments, or divisions. Indeed, individuals are implicitly encouraged to see others as competition: there is only so much budgetary pie to go around, and the departments with the longest forks and the sharpest elbows (or the most entrepreneurial attitude) get the most pie.

None of this is good for higher education. As faculty members at a publicly funded institution, Jansa and Nichols do not argue that departments come together or align with administrators to lobby state and federal governments to push for greater allocations to education. Nor do they seem at all bothered that the corporatization of the university erodes the powerful principle of shared governance, in which faculty members are recognized as centrally important to the running of the institution, from crafting curriculum to serving on committees (unpaid work that would never be demanded of employees in the corporate sector, by the way). One need not be a hidebound academic dinosaur to argue that students are not consumers of a fungible product but learners engaged in the practice of world making.

It is certainly possible to “reconcile the entrepreneurial demands [of the corporate university] with academic excellence and continue to serve our students’ needs,” but at what cost? Academia is a rare arena in which experience and institutional commitment—values that are anathema to the start-up mind-set of the entrepreneur—are cherished. Entrepreneurialism is inextricable from the desire for market share; is the goal that underenrolled departments will be fighting each other, Hunger Games style, for full-time equivalent faculty members? Equally important, entrepreneurialism brings with it the hope for hitting it rich—hardly a motivation for faculty members at underfunded public institutions where entrepreneurial success redounds to the college or university, not the individual. And, finally, I hardly think it is cynical to believe that the college classroom could be a place outside the profit motive, a place of meaningful collaboration and imaginative learning, a place that assumes the intrinsic value of intellectual labor.

This is not to say that Jansa and Nichols’s ideas are all bad—far from it. They are right that departments are too separated from each other and that too often educational institutions are not meaningful participants in the communities they inhabit. Cross-disciplinary collaboration in both pedagogy and scholarship can be thrilling, and I would like to see more support for team-teaching, interdisciplinary learning, and collaborative research and writing. Moreover, I’m intrigued by their suggestion that academic departments also create partnerships with administrative and student services offices, to make contact with students who might otherwise not connect with language departments. But this kind of collaboration is not simply gaming the system, or playing by administrative rules, or repeating almost incomprehensible corporatise (I have yet to work out what “the ability to teach actionable intercultural competence through cross-disciplinary real-life curricular content” quite means).
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Partnering is not the same thing as building lasting relationships across disciplines and offices; it is not the same thing as fostering respect and a shared mission.

And the one group that seems to escape any critique at all is state legislators, who have methodically eroded support for higher education, not to mention the administrators pushing the logic of neoliberalism on faculty members and students. Policy debates over education funding are structured around concepts like return on investment, as though there can be a one-to-one relationship between what students learn and their earning potential or that allocating taxpayer funds somehow gives lawmakers the right to control curriculum. This is an enormous blind spot. As teacher activism in 2018 has shown us, voters can get very excited about funding public education, up to and including running for office on a proeducation platform. I am not yet ready to abandon the public sphere as a place to advocate for the higher education we believe in, with our neighbors, our elected officials, and even our administrators.

This is all to say, I’d like to make a plea for a decidedly old-fashioned notion: collective action to make change. This kind of action is bottom-up; it doesn’t have a polysyllabic lexicon and is rarely championed by the corporate world. But it works. We have only to look at the various teachers’ strikes around the country in 2018, primarily in states that have been grappling with the logic of neoliberalism and educational austerity for years. In Arizona, Colorado, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Washington, and West Virginia, teachers have been walking out of classrooms and demanding higher pay, better working conditions, and more respect for publicly funded education. Moreover, in these heavily Republican states, citizens are increasingly deciding to vote Democratic to support increased teacher pay and enriched public education.

This is not to say that faculty members in higher education should be organizing walkouts (indeed, in my own state, New York, it is illegal for public employees to participate in any kind of job action). But it does provide evidence that the trends with which we have been living are not irreversible, that corporatization and the mania for assessment and quantification are not inevitable, that the recasting of students as consumers is not a fait accompli. This is a hard fight, to be sure. The value of higher education in general and nonpreprofessional higher education in particular has taken a beating over the past few years. But I am not willing simply to throw in the towel and engage in Orwellian doublespeak. As humanists, as language and literature specialists, we have to be smarter and more engaged advocates for what we do and what our students learn. Jansa and Nichols are absolutely right that we need to move out into our communities to connect with our neighbors—with voters, not stakeholders—to make clear the intrinsic value of what we do. This means stepping up, not rolling over.

Note

1. This is one of several examples of laying responsibility for the distrust between faculty members and administrators and the shrinking enrollments in language classes firmly at the feet of the faculty. These cynical attitudes, Jansa and Nichols claim, “engender distrust of top administrators because their interests are viewed as undermining the purity of academic inquiry and the integrity of intellectual curiosity.” The drop in world language classes results from the fact that departments “have maintained bifurcated instructional and curricular systems, have failed to engage faculty in much-needed change initiatives, and have done little to counteract . . . a systemic ‘marginalization of world language instruction.’”