

Obama's Classroom Spies

Son of PRISP

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As the continuities and disjunctures between the Bush and Obama administrations come into focus it becomes increasingly clear that while Obama's domestic agenda has some identifiable breaks with Bush's, at its core, the new administration remains committed to staying the course of American militarization. Now we have an articulate, nuanced president who supports elements of progressive domestic policies, can even comfortably say the phrase LGBT in public speeches, while funding military programs at alarming levels and continuing the Bush administration's military and intelligence invasion of what used to be civilian life.

The latest manifestation of this continuity came last week when Dennis C. Blair, Director of National Intelligence, announced plans to transform the Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholars Program (PRISP) from a pilot project into a permanent budget item. Blair also announced plans to establish a "Reserve Officers' Training Corps" to train unidentified future intelligence officers in US college classrooms. Like students receiving PRISP funds, the identities of students participating in these programs would not be known to professors, university administrators or fellow students—in effect, these future intelligence analysts and agents would conduct their first covert missions in our university classrooms.

Four years ago I wrote a series of CounterPunch exposés on the Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholars Program (PRISP), then a pilot project funded under section 318 of the 2004 Intelligence Authorization Act. PRISP links undergraduate and graduate students with US security and intelligence agencies like the NSA or CIA, and unannounced to universities, professors or fellow-students, PRISP-students enter American university campuses, classrooms, laboratories and professor's offices without disclosing links to these agencies. PRISP was originally conceived by anthropologist Felix Moos, long a proponent of using anthropological knowledge in waging of counterinsurgency campaigns—an area of growing interest to the Obama administration as it prepares for prolonged soft power counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan.

It seems likely that many of the affected disciplines will offer little resistance and some may quickly warm to announcements of any new funding stream. Traditionally, the disciplines of political science, history or area specialists coming from the humanities have seldom resisted such developments; but for disciplines like anthropology, these undisclosed intelligence-linked programs present devastating ethical and practical problems, as the non-discloser of funding and links to intelligence agencies flies in the face of the basic ethical principles of the discipline. But even without the problems for individual disciplinary ethics codes, the presence of these undisclosed secret sharers in our classrooms betrays fundamental trusts that lie at the core of honest academic endeavors.

While the National Intelligence Director's move to make PRISP a permanent budget item will damage the academic freedom and integrity of American universities, it will likely be met by the open arms of university administrators facing crashed university endowments and dwindling budgets. That some administrators would so easily accommodate themselves and their institutional integrity for the promise of funds should be of little surprise, but I fear that the combined forces of the current economic collapse conjoined with President Obama's ability to bring a new liberal credibility to the this warmed-over Bush era project will induce many faculty and students to seriously consider participating in these programs. Times are hard and as funds get scarce it will be increasingly difficult for many to say no.

This development is just the latest installment in on ongoing efforts to increase the militarization of American higher education. None of this should be surprising in a nation that alone spends about 48% of the planet's military budget. In the social sciences, these shifts away from broad funding sources designed to create independent knowledgeable scholars, to those now requiring indentured servitude has been a long time coming.

Back in the early 1990s when the National Security Education Program (NSEP) was first introduced it was widely condemned by professional associations like the Middle East Studies Association and the African Studies Association, Latin American Studies Association for blurring the lines between independent scholarship raised by NSEP's its requirements that program participants later seek employment in governmental agencies. But with the depressed economy, plummeting endowment funds at universities and foundations, the difficult academic job market, and scarce academic funding sources, I fear that professional associations' reactions against these developments will be muted. As pilot programs, PRISP and the Intelligence Community Scholars Programs made scarce funds available to students, as traditional non-payback funding programs were being cut. Programs like PRISP that seek to tie young scholars to agencies like CIA early in their career as a means of bringing new ideas and skills to these agencies will fail in meeting the claimed goal of getting these agencies to think in new ways because such ties to institutional culture early in student-agent careers will increase the influence of agency cultural groupthink while diminishing the impact of academic culture. If the Obama administration really wants to improve governmental agencies' knowledge of and approaches to the world, they need to increase funding to a broad range of educational funding programs that do not encumber or limit the range of knowledge in the ways that programs like PRISP do.

This move to establish PRISP as a permanent budgetary item is the sort of program that likely will speed through congress—which can then claim it is both supporting education funding, and military and intelligence sectors, with a bonus feel-good work-ethic mandate thrown-in by requiring students to payback their funds through required future governmental service. But this push will be done without an outside assessment of PRISP as pilot program. PRISP needs an independent assessment of what it has accomplished—including an assessment of the impact of the predatory penalties facing former PRISP students who come to realize that they do not wish to fulfill their commitments to work for these agencies upon graduation. Because of the lack of transparency surrounding PRISP, we have little idea what is really going on with the program. Last year I was able to identify one social science recipient of PRISP funds who explained to me that PRISP had been such a failure in finding social scientists to fund that PRISP had sought out this person and provided them with funds for work that was already underway just to spend-down the PRISP budget. Given these recent difficulties with the program, I wonder if the current expansion of PRISP is a supply-side effort to troll the pool of increasingly

underfunded and debt-carrying desperate young scholars with few other funding options.

Professional associations like the American Association of University Professors, the American Psychological Association and the American Anthropological Association need to speak out in opposition of the permanent establishment of PRISP. PRISP risks further blurring already hazy borders marking proper independent academic roles, and it stands to confuse academic identities in ways that many will not even realize. Some of these processes are reminiscent of a recurrent motif in Philip K. Dick's stories where protagonists becomes unclear of their own agency and identity; becoming unsure of their own histories and memories, or true political alliances—in effect becoming undercover agents with identities unknown even to themselves. As this new generation of programs covertly brings undeclared and unidentifiable students into our universities they disrupt university identities and transforms the roles all who teach, research, study and work there in ways that they will not necessarily understand—as institutions of higher learning further lose their independence and become unwitting agents of state intelligence functions.

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