“Colonizing Curriculum: The Aesthetic of Innovation in Higher Education”

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After the inauguration its current president Ángel Cabrera in 2012, the neoliberalization of higher education in George Mason University has come into sharp focus through a new branding campaign called Mason IDEA. The university’s motto, “Where Innovation is Tradition,” capitalizes on concepts of Innovation, Diversity, Entrepreneurship and Access (IDEA) to raise private investment in GMU and secure state funding. This aesthetic of innovation, that places more value on the contributions of entrepreneurship and individualism than those of democratic social movements, has frightening implications for the university’s curriculum and social justice efforts on campus. GMU’s recent collaboration with Arison Investment Group, an Israeli corporation that directly profits from apartheid conditions in Palestine, in the form of a $3 million donation for an endowed professor of “Doing Good Values” attests to this condition. In this paper, we examine the partnership between GMU and Arison Group as a case study for how the aesthetic of innovation and “conscious capitalism” paths the way for capital accumulation at the expense of social justice in the academy. The aesthetic of innovation at GMU is a constitutive element of the institution, evidenced not only by the recent branding campaign, but also current course offerings such as “Creativity & Innovation, Risks & Opportunities,” taught by GMU’s fifth president Alan Merten. We argue that these efforts by the university administration and the Board of Visitors are in service of the institutionalization of a growth-oriented environment and curriculum that produces entrepreneurs in place of citizens.