SUN DEVIL DANCE MARATHON
#FORTHEKIDS

What is it?
A fun-filled celebration for all campuses with giveaways and activities while honoring our Phoenix Children's Hospital families and fundraising efforts.

When is it?
Saturday, March 19th
1:00-4:00PM
Maroon Gym
Sun Devil Fitness Center
Tempe Campus

Our Mission
To provide year-round support for the kids and their families at PCH in fun, meaningful ways.

Join the Movement
Text sddm to 51-555
Create an account as an individual or join a team.

Fundraising Steps
1) Scan our QR code to join
2) Link a Facebook fundraiser
3) Repost bingo sheets from our Instagram
4) Ask family & friends

Event Benefits
- Student performers and DJs
- FREE all you can eat food
- FREE spirit bags with t-shirts & other goodies
- Giveaways & other prizes

@sundevildm
Sun Devil Dance Marathon
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Editor's letter

In the historical human cycle of consuming and producing, we now find ourselves embedded in a material culture so rapidly developing, it consumes itself. In this issue, consumption looks like a price tag on material well-being in a competitive attention economy. Writers sought to cover the many ways University students became the product of mass consumption and found themselves exchanged through dating apps, textbook companies and corporate cannabis.
Arizona’s recreational marijuana program set aside 26 business licenses for communities disproportionately impacted by the war on drugs, but corporate cannabis presents an imperiled illusion of choice for applicants attempting to enter the industry

by Kiera Riley

The stack of papers lay on the table, but the person who presents them gives nothing away about what the pages contain.

They shoot off promises of money, security and stability. They make no mention of the millions, the multi-generational wealth they would be depriving them of.

Within 10 minutes, they coerce an initial here and a signature there, all the while putting the already million dollar cannabis company they represent in the running for another license to operate — now worth anywhere between $10-to-20 million.

Celeste Rodriguez, a principal partner at Acre41, a cannabis consulting firm, described this scenario of “predatory” agreements between cannabis giants and social equity license applicants, often defined by lengthy contracts, little time, intense pressures and false promises.

The Maricopa County Superior Court recently dropped a lawsuit filed by Acre41 and the Greater Phoenix Urban League against the Arizona Department of Health Services over the broad guidelines governing the social equity licensing program.

Social equity licenses are designated for communities “disproportionately impacted” by cannabis prohibition to provide some stake in the rapidly growing market.

But, as the lawsuit cites, the program does not account for license transfers, leading large multi-state cannabis companies to corner qualified applicants into contracts and buy them out for only a fraction of what the license is worth.

“We wouldn’t have a problem if they partnered up,” Rodriguez said. “Our problem is… they end up buying out the person for pennies on the dime while they build their portfolio that they will be able to sell in the future, when it’s federally legal, for billions.”

License to operate

Arizona’s recreational market brought in $1.2 billion in revenue in the first year of sales. And college-aged adults are one of the leading groups fueling the industry, with consumption hitting a historic high in 2020 according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

At the same time, cannabis business ownership in the U.S. is predominantly white, with ownership by people of color decreasing from 28% in 2019 to 13% in 2021, according to a report by MJBizDaily.

Proposition 207, the voter referendum legalizing marijuana in Arizona, came with promises of social justice, economic opportunity and some form of reparations through the social equity licensing program.

The initiative required 26 social equity licenses for communities “disproportionately impacted by the enforcement of previous marijuana laws,” though the specifics of the program were left to be worked out down the line.

In June 2021, six months after adult sales started, ADHS adopted eligibility require-
ments for the program.

To qualify, at least 51% of the applying entity and its applicants need to meet three of the four required criteria. Applicants must

- Have an annual household income no more than 400% of the poverty level in at least three years between 2016 through 2020, which translates to around $50,000 for one person and $100,000 for a household of four
- Have an expungement of a prior marijuana or marijuana paraphernalia charge
- Be related to someone with an expunged marijuana charge
- Reside for at least three years between 2016 through 2020 in zip codes deemed disproportionately impacted by cannabis enforcement

The marked zip codes had to have a Black/African American, American Indian/Alaska Native or Hispanic population greater than 50% and over 25% enrollment in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Rodriguez said the requirements overlook areas and people impacted by prior prohibition and make it difficult for people who do qualify to apply in the first place.

Applicants are required to put down a nonrefundable $4,000 fee to be entered in the license lottery, which Zsa Zsa Simone, a principal partner with Acre41, sees as an insurmountable hurdle for some.

“How can you expect someone who is on welfare and receiving food stamps to even have $4,000 to apply for a license?” Simone said. “When your income is already limited and the rules say it has to be limited?”

A necessary evil

This paradox makes corporate cannabis an essential and integrated part of social equity license programs across the country, for better or for worse.

Jon Uddell, director of politics at the Arizona chapter of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Law, said in the first 18 months of receiving a license, applicants need to apply for approval to operate — a process which entails securing, renovating and properly zoning a property, buying equipment, hiring a workforce, developing policies and procedures, submitting a security plan, consulting with lawyers; the list goes on.

Though costs fluctuate, any cannabis entrepreneur is looking at around $2 million to get started.

There are no state funds for cannabis entrepreneurs, and federal banks are barred from doling out loans because cannabis remains illegal at the federal level. Securing backing from an established cannabis company is often the only channel of investment social equity applicants can access.

Established multi-state operators back social equity applicants in different capacities, and partnerships are not always deceptive. Many make the argument that they, too, are trying to provide support to entrepreneurs from marginalized communities.

Raheem Uqdad, director of corporate social responsibility at Curaleaf, said in an email that Curaleaf, one of the largest multi-state operators, is involved in “active discus-

Uqdad said Curaleaf offers free legal services, mentorship and equipment. They also partner with minority-owned businesses on supply and products.

“The legal cannabis industry has a responsibility to right the wrongs of the past,” Uqdad wrote.

Whether or not the industry truly takes on that responsibility remains a question. Legal cannabis claims to be an industry driven to do better, to be more socially progressive.

Scott Leischow, a professor and the executive director of clinical and translational science at the College of Health Solutions, specializes in tobacco addiction and policy.

As he watches cannabis legalization unfurl, Leischow sees some parallels between big tobacco and big cannabis — particularly in marketing attempts to sway public opinion.

“What’s happening now is an effort to impact social norms,” Leischow said. “This is something we need to be attentive to as citizens.”

Motives seem murky to some, especially in analyzing the lengths big cannabis went to find qualified social equity applicants.

Some companies, namely Mint Cannabis and Copperstate Farms, blanketed neighborhoods in qualifying zipcodes with fliers, promising a “life changing opportunity and claiming “owning a cannabis dispensary can be more than a dream.”

Copperstate Farms set up a website “Your Bright Horizon” and offered a $100 incentive for each qualified applicant someone referred to the website.
Rodriguez said others went to homeless shelters or held expungement clinics solely to secure access to qualified applicants. Among the bunch, Acre41 found some of the agreements between applicants and multi-state operators to be “predatory.”

She said applicants are slated as “straw applicants,” used to secure the license, and are then bought out by the cannabis companies for less than their worth.

Down the line

Social equity programs reached similar fates in other legal cannabis markets across the country. The lawsuit filed by Acre41 and gpul was hardly an anomaly.

Acre41 and gpul filed the lawsuit against ADHS in November. The main complaint cited was the lack of reinvestment in communities disproportionately impacted by cannabis prohibition.

“The regulations … make no effort to ensure the jobs, sales tax revenues, and broader economic benefits marijuana businesses generate are returned to those communities most disproportionately harmed by the drug war,” the lawsuit stated.

The lawsuit called for stricter oversight on license transfers, Rodriguez wrote in the filing. “We have no objection to private owners eventually transferring the license, but the social equity provision should be required into perpetuity, or at least for an extremely long period of time.”

She wrote that with the transfer change there will be more “opportunity for disproportionately impacted people (and) communities to be positively impacted indefinitely.”

Maricopa County Superior Court dropped Acre41 and the Greater Phoenix Urban League’s lawsuit in early February, claiming the program upheld the language in the voter initiative to “promote” the ownership and operation of marijuana businesses by heavily policed communities.

Though the lawsuit was dropped, there are still efforts to address the transfer of licenses, though they, too, might have unintended consequences.

House Bill 2545, sponsored by Rep. Kevin Payne, R-Peoria, would ban the transfer of social equity licenses for 10 years after the license is received and would only allow transfers to individuals qualifying under the social equity guidelines.

Though the lawsuit was dropped, there are still efforts to address the transfer of licenses, though they, too, might have unintended consequences.

Arizona NORML is neutral on the bill. Uddell sees it as a potentially positive change but worries about social equity licenses becoming a “second-class” license because of the inability to transfer or sell them.

He also worries without transferability license holders would not be able to use their license as collateral when looking for investments.

Uddell hopes, reservedly, for more channels of funding for social equity applicants in the future to lessen the need for multi-state operator involvement. He also recommends, when entering into agreements with corporate cannabis, qualified social equity applicants read the entirety of the contract presented and have a lawyer present if possible.

“It comes down to, ‘does the social equity person feel this is a good deal? Is it in their best interest?’” Uddell said. “That’s really how you want to respect the autonomy of the social equity applicant.”

ADHS processed over 1,500 applications, with some cannabis companies putting upwards of 100 people under one applying entity — which contradicts the rules of the program.

The lottery to randomly award licenses is expected to be underway by the spring, though many have doubts about how random the process will truly be.

Rodriguez and Acre41 plan to continue following the license rollout closely and are prepared to break applicants out of bad contracts they may have been roped into.

“The fight is not over,” Rodriguez said.

“How can you expect someone who is on welfare and receiving food stamps to even have $4,000 to apply for a license? When your income is already limited and the rules say it has to be limited?”

— Zsa Zsa Simone
Help yourself

Amid mass of self care as a fix-all solution against college stressors and mental health problems, some students feel unsatisfied with University options to relieve stress

by Roxanne Banuelos
Illustrations by Bronson Soza

Reem Elsaad, a junior, is double-majoring in global studies and political science. She's taking 21 credits while balancing two internships, a couple of clubs and a professional dance team.

She constantly asks herself if the heavy workload is worth it, or if she should take a step back. “Then I wonder, ‘Oh my god, will my GPA go down? Is my scholarship at stake?’” Elsaad said.

Despite balancing mental health issues and her heavy workload, she fears if she quit in any capacity, she would be letting her family, peers and professors down.

Amid the stress, Elsaad also sees the University emphasize wellness and self-care in the abstract while simultaneously witnessing and hearing about the failings of health services and other similar resources.

“They focus on short-term solutions ... there aren’t many students who need just short-term help,” Elsaad said. “I think everybody needs long-term help instead of just being told to breathe or to talk to a person a couple of times. It’s not feasible.”

Wellness has become a marketing tool for higher-ed institutions. And outside of university environments, students are bombarded by advertisements and social media trends rooted in the didactic push of products, strict regimens and generic mental health programming.

For university students confronted with an increased number of deadlines and lifestyle changes in their day-to-day life, the seemingly glorious promise of a fix-all can put the onus of self-preservation on the individual instead of the circumstances at play.

**Wellness product overload**

The general public has become more entranced by the idea of actively enhancing and preserving their beauty, health and general wellbeing. The wellness industry capitalized on this societal shift, with its value skyrocketing to over $4.5 trillion globally in 2020.

During the coronavirus pandemic, Google searches for “self-care” reached an all-time high. Once defined as a series of healthy lifestyle choices amounting to an improved quality of life, self-care is now sold as a product.

While wellness is rooted in an idea of self-preservation, the industry relies on the notion that products and services are necessary to help someone better themselves in ways unattainable on their own. The mass-marketing of commodities and oddities intended to aid us in our quest toward good health can send the wrong message.

The wellness industry includes anything from health, fitness, nutrition, appearance to mindfulness. It gives companies across different sectors the opportunity to capitalize on a seemingly endless opportunity for sales, so long as they claim to improve the consumer’s wellbeing.

Between clean beauty cosmetics, green smoothie juicers, meditation apps and yoga retreats, the wellness industry expanded close to 6% every year from 2013-2017 as global brands adopted betterment-via-commodities as a marketing tactic.

Companies with no historical association with wellness are clamoring to create products that claim to ease the stressors in their customers’ lives. In January 2022, the American meat production firm Oscar Mayer collaborated with Korean Beauty brand Seoul Mamas — an unexpected pairing — to produce a hydrogel face mask designed to resemble a slice of bologna while providing anti-aging and hydration benefits.

Judith Karshmer, dean of the Edson College of Nursing and Health Innovation, urges consumers to question how these wellness products are being presented to the public.

“We need to stress that health and wellness is not an external application but an internal exploration,” Karshmer said. “It’s about doing something that fits into your lifestyle, it’s not necessarily some external...
product or even external activity, it’s something you enjoy doing.”

At its core, wellness is about creating a positive relationship with your body while placing an emphasis on physical and mental health. But the constant barrage of products and expectations may add extra pressure onto people who already feel the demand to be better.

"Just like with any hardcore marketing campaign, we have to stop and think, 'What is it that they're really pushing here?" Karshmer said.

The internet also has a heavy hand in pushing this narrative. One such example is the trend known as “That girl,” a typically college-aged woman who has every aspect of her life in order by implementing a long list of wellness to-dos, including skincare, working out, journaling and eating healthy.

While social media influencers are known to romanticize themselves through curated virtual personas, usually by outwardly projecting a productive, successful and happy life, this trend sends a direct message. By vigilantly adopting a strict list of habits and products, you can transform into a perfect person overnight.

How wellness targets students

Dior Vargas was a freshman at Smith College the day she walked to her college counseling office in an effort to seek help for her severe depression. She quickly realized her therapist did not understand her or her background. Growing up Hispanic, Vargas was raised to not speak about the way she felt. Knowing her single mother had bigger issues to worry about, like putting food on the table for her and her sibling, she made sure to “not ruffle any feathers or make too much noise.” But since the age of eight, she battled severe depression and attempted suicide several times.

“There’s this sense of strength that we have to exude, we have to come across as self-sufficient,” Vargas said of her Hispanic heritage.

Now Vargas works as a mental health advocate for communities of color and an educator for higher education and other entities. She prioritizes tools and knowledge to help people advocate for themselves.

The work of Vargas and other activists has made wellness more accessible for those who didn’t grow up familiar with it.

Vargas now helps universities visualize what inclusive wellness can, and should, look like.

While ASU tries to foster an environment that provides resources and embraces communities of color, Vargas believes the wellness industry overall is not inclusive to people of color. However, she has noticed there has been increased efforts to support these communities in recent years.

Zachary Reeves-Blurton, the assistant director of the ASU Center for Mindfulness, Compassion and Resilience, said ASU needs to be able to provide tools so students can be resilient when facing challenges.

For students with full-time jobs, children, mental health issues and diverse traumas, life experiences may affect the ways in which they need to receive support.

The Center for Mindfulness provides mindfulness tips as a basic set of tools and practices students from all backgrounds can practice on a daily basis in order to combat stress both academically and interpersonally.

Although Karshmer believes ASU has an “outrageous” number of high-quality programs around wellness and physical and mental health, she knows there are areas in need of improvement.

“We have services that other places would die for,” she said. “The problem is they’re all siloed. There’s one here, and there’s one there, but unless you happen to know about
it, or unless you seek it out, it’s not apparent to you and it doesn’t feel as accessible as it’s designed to.”

For Vargas, her struggle with mental health in college caused her grades and GPA to plummet. She skipped or slept through class and missed assignments constantly.

“My mental health really ruined my entire college experience,” Vargas said. “If I had known that I could get accommodations, that would have been a game changer.”

Ruby Maderafont decided to join Tinder. It took seconds for the app to download. And after inputting their personal information and uploading some photos, they were swiping left and right on an abyssal database of Tempe singles in no time.

Maderafont, a sophomore majoring in museum studies, was new to Arizona, new to ASU and new to adulthood. They were aware of the various negative stigmas surrounding dating apps — they are unserious, unsafe or just for hookups — but decided to try it out anyway.

Within a few months, Maderafont found a serious partner.

No longer a sketchy prospect or a desperate last resort, online dating has become an integral resource for today’s singles. After all, if it wasn’t for Tinder’s algorithmic match-making process, Maderafont might still be single.

According to Liesel Sharabi, a professor in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication and a leading expert on the psychology and sociology of online dating, the dating app userbase is increasingly dominated by young adults. Over the course of her research, she has met multiple young college students who say they have only ever met partners through the internet.

Online dating has never been more prevalent. Reaching all-time high engagement rates during the pandemic, it is now the No. 1 way American couples first meet.

Behind the boom is a sprawling and experimental multi-billion dollar industry. Tech entrepreneurs are using data collection and algorithms to fundamentally reshape the way sex, romance and relationships unfold in the 21st century.

“This is how people are dating,” Sharabi said. “Sometimes it’s surprising to me how little attention is paid to it. It’s treated like a superficial game when it has really serious implications.”

Data, dates, decisions
The original dating sites were essentially search engines. Match.com, eHarmony and Gaydar allowed users to browse and message the profiles of other singles.

The proposition seemed intuitive. In a world where social media was becoming ubiquitous, there was no reason to limit your dating pool to the neighborhood bar or a local pottery class.

As userbases grew and diversified, so did the industry. Its biggest recent breakthrough was the introduction of algorithmic curation. Instead of users filtering through profiles themselves, matching algorithms could use data to suggest potential partners automatically.

According to Sharabi, it can be difficult to discern what effect, if any, these algorithms have on user satisfaction.

“On the one hand, you have what the algorithms are actually doing,” Sharabi said. “On the other hand, you have people’s per-
exceptions of what they’re doing. Some of these platforms really talk up the process. They set really high expectations.”

Sharabi found evidence of what she calls “Placebo AI” in her research. When users believe the matching algorithm to be effective, they also tend to have better outcomes after meeting a match in person.

A more sinister side of dating app algorithms emerges when race, gender and other identity factors are considered. Though most apps do not feature overt race filtering anymore — Grindr only recently removed its ethnicity filter in 2020 — they can still facilitate discriminatory behaviors and profiling in a process known as algorithmic racism.

Sarah Florini, an assistant professor of film and media studies, said preference-learning algorithms like those used in dating apps should be subject to greater scrutiny than they currently are.

“It’s very naive to act as if an algorithm picking up on our preference for a racial group is equivalent ethically to an algorithm picking up on your preference for musical genre,” Florini said.

Florini’s research centers on race, surveillance and digital cultures. Like Sharabi, she is skeptical of placing more culpability on algorithms than on the people designing and using them.

“People like to blame the algorithm like it’s a monster that lives in the hills and comes down periodically to terrorize us,” Florini said. “Yes, they do have bias built in from the beginning, but also they learn by watching us.”

Because matching algorithms are a major selling point for dating apps like Tinder, Bumble and Hinge, they are usually kept proprietary. Sharabi said this makes it difficult, if not impossible, to conduct public research on them.

“Maybe they have figured out the secret to compatibility,” Sharabi said. “I mean, they have massive amounts of data at their disposal. But there’s also this possibility that it has to do with perceptions and how they influence people’s behavior.”

Data is a key asset for online dating companies. Tinder and Hinge collect and utilize a wide array of user data, from message histories to ethnicity to bodily statistics.

Perhaps most important to app functionality is user location data, which Florini said is the most powerful data companies have to make predictions and alter people’s behaviors. Though user data is encrypted and private, it is typically shared with third parties and used in advertising campaigns, and it may be less secure than companies claim.

Whether or not algorithmic dating apps are effective, harmful or secure, they are undeniably lucrative for investors and shareholders. Global dating app revenue has been steadily increasing over the past decade, reaching over $3 billion by 2020.

On the market

In many ways, dating apps are a utilitarian extension of social media.

Online dating and social media business models both operate within the attention economy, competing for users’ time and recurring engagement.

“Dating apps can be very curated,” Maderafont said. “You don’t really know what you’re getting into until you meet in person.”

Profiles are essentially advertisements, allowing users to present a flirtatious, idealized and selective version of themselves. The result is sometimes an artificial experience in which the user “can start to feel disposable,” Sharabi said.

While social media is designed for habitual engagement, singles looking for monogamous relationships usually plan on deleting their dating apps upon finding a partner. That doesn’t always make for a sustainable business model.

“I think of Tinder’s advertising,” Sharabi
Hugh Downs School of Human Communication who researches digital sexual behaviors and abuse. He said studies have shown women sometimes feel unsafe using dating apps because they are more likely to be pressured to engage in unwanted sexual interactions online.

"It sometimes becomes uncomfortable to go on dating apps because there is that perceived pressure," he said. "You never know when someone's going to turn a conversation."

Both Van Ouytsel and Sharabi noted that casual dating is never inherently bad. Still, dating apps can attract sexual predators and have failed to keep users safe from abuse in the past.

Online identity; digital future

Online dating is all about options. For some, its capacity to weed out a perfectly matched partner in an intimidating dating pool is its biggest advantage.

For others, online dating is an indispensable resource in the absence of abundant options. For LGBTQ+ people, it has changed the landscape of queer community building entirely.

"(LGBTQ+ people) are the original dating app and online dating users," Sharabi said. "This is where it really started."

Today, LGBTQ+ people continue to predominate the online dating scene. According to Pew Research Center, lesbian, gay and bisexual adults are around twice as likely to have a current partner online.

Blake Matthews, an undergraduate psychology student and vice president of communications of BeYouAsu, said LGBTQ+ people typically have a different relationship with dating apps than other users.

"The difference is that LGBT people are often either not on dating apps for dating purposes at all, or they're looking for a seri-
The result is sometimes an artificial experience in which the user “can start to feel disposable.” — Liesel Sharabi
The textbook industrial complex

Despite radical changes in curriculum design and management, outsourced course materials are ‘a persistent concern’ for students

by Alexis Moulton
Illustrations by Bronson Soza
College students are intimately familiar with exorbitant price tags on textbooks. Often dipping into scholarships and student loans or working extra hours just to manage the costs, many routinely cite course materials as a serious financial burden.

Over 60% of students intentionally avoid buying course materials when possible, according to the Education Data Initiative. Others look to the internet for cheaper materials as online textbook alternatives grow more popular. Some even pirate materials.

Universities are acquainted with students’ textbook price tag outrage. ASU factors $1,000 in course materials into the estimated yearly cost of attendance for undergraduates. The library compiles student resources for navigating rising costs.

In February 2021, Undergraduate Student Government Tempe passed Senate Bill 25, creating a $50,000 emergency student textbook fund with excess appropriations amid COVID-19.

Bhavani Subbaraman, a senior who was on the USGT appropriations committee when the bill passed, described textbook prices as an economic equity issue and “a persistent concern” for students.

But textbook and course material prices have actually slightly decreased in recent years. The average selling price of required course materials has declined in the past five years...
“Students are more and more considered to be consumers in universities, but there's not enough transparency or enough commitment to giving them a quality product.”

— Molly Ott

at Sun Devil Campus Stores, according to data from Follett. Nationally, annual spending on course materials has dropped 28% in the same time frame, according to the National Association of College Stores.

As sticker prices and student spending decrease, adoption of online course materials are increasing.

“Digital first” initiatives are now the priority in education publishing as the pandemic ushered in another notable surge in reliance on online learning platforms. In the 2021-22 academic year to date, course materials purchased from Sun Devil Campus Stores were 45% digital and 55% print.

College course materials are still expensive and proprietary, but their price tags are less visible than ever before. Against the backdrop of a digital revolution in education, the largest publishers have found a way to quietly maintain their dominance of the curriculum market.

Instead of opportunistically jacking up consumer textbook prices like they may have in the past, companies like Pearson and Cengage are tapping directly into the tuition revenue streams of colleges themselves.

By contracting out a broad new range of services — including software management, curriculum design, student recruitment and marketing — publishers underwent a radical business model transformation by having a direct stake in student enrollment and how much they pay in tuition.

Industry games

The term industrial complex refers to the comprehensive infiltration and cooperation of public services by an associated profit-driven industry. In political economy, industrial complexes pose a threat to social wellbeing, economic stability and government accountability.

The college textbook industry has frequently been accused of anti-competitive market behaviors. In the 2010s, nearly 80% of the American education publishing market was composed of five major companies, which were federally blocked from consolidating further.

These companies have typically opted to strategically deny these accusations. Arthur Blakemore, vice provost for student success at ASU and an economics professor, believes
the education publishing market is competitive enough to maintain fairness.

"I think there are enough significant publishers and enough significant outlets that no company has a monopoly," Blakemore said.

Molly Ott, an associate professor in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College who researches policy in higher education, has a different outlook. She thinks the industry is moving toward more market consolidation.

"Unless there’s more regulation and things change drastically, I believe that some of these larger entities are going to keep merging and take over all the other players," Ott said.

But monopoly accusations are old news. Education policy experts like Ott are increasingly concerned with the direct administrative integration of publishers’ services with universities’ course management — in other words, the early signs of a budding industrial complex.

According to Ott, publishing companies that thrived in the traditional print textbook market now derive much of their income from online program management (OPM) contracts with universities. Around half of these contracts use tuition-sharing payment structures.

"I don’t think a lot of students realize that not all of their tuition dollars are going to ASU per se," Ott said. "Literally percentages of their tuition are committed to other companies and programs."

Tuition-sharing OPM contracts typically earn anywhere from 40%-80% of tuition revenue from courses which use their services, according to an investigation by The Century Foundation.

ASU’s 2015 OPM contract with Pearson has a fluctuating payment model based on the total number of students enrolled, but the company is guaranteed between 41% and 56% of tuition revenue for their managed courses, up to 35,000 enrolled students. The contract applies to all degree programs that fall under the ASU Online brand, with some exceptions.

The services provided by OPM providers — the most prominent including Blackboard, Wiley, 2U and Pearson — are varied, falling far outside the traditional scope of education publishers. They include learning management systems, like Canvas, homework and textbook software, and student recruitment and retention services.

As a result, third-party companies have access to a wide array of confidential information, including data on university students. Pearson’s contract with ASU, for example, grants the company access to ASU’s confidential personnel databases.

A 2018 internal
audit found the University had “not implemented adequate third party oversight monitoring processes of Pearson” and that “Pearson’s access to ASU information system (was) not appropriately restricted.”

Blakemore said the University continues to work on “very favorable deals for students” in the realm of online course materials and program management. ASU is considered a national trailblazer in online education, but as its partnerships with Pearson and others continue to evolve, the next few years will likely shape the future of online learning.

**Digital markets**

“The important thing to recognize is that we are going through a transition,” James Dwyer, assistant vice president of auxiliary business services, said. “It’s probably in one of the most volatile stages that I’ve ever seen, and I’ve been working in this space for a little over 20 years.”

Dwyer oversees contracted partnerships between ASU auxiliaries, like the University bookstore, and third parties. In his opinion, the digital shift is exciting; moving to online programs could potentially make course materials more affordable for students.

Most recent data does indicate declining average expenditures on course materials, either due to adoption of cheaper digital options or the use of free alternatives, which are increasingly popular with students.

Blakemore believes course materials will continue to get cheaper, at least in the immediate future. He also thinks the customized learning experiences made possible by online courseware will increase net affordability for students.

Blakemore claims some ASU classes that incorporated personalized and adaptive courseware have seen pass rates improve.

“As an economist, I think about efficiency,” Blakemore said. “If I only had to take the course once, that’s a lot cheaper than taking it twice.”

But while virtual programs are typically cheaper and more efficient to maintain than physical publishing outlets, the increasing prevalence of online and hybrid-style education has not yet spurred overall savings in tuition for students.

For this reason, Ott’s outlook is far less optimistic. Many OPMs have already recovered financially from startup costs, but hardly any universities are passing those savings on to students.

“It’s feasible to offer fully online degrees for a lot cheaper, but almost no one does that,” Ott said. “I’m a little bit cynical as to whether any changes in technology … will really translate to lower tuition. That hasn’t been the case writ large across the U.S. for online programs.”

Instead, Pearson and other publishers have successfully adapted alongside the changing market, staking their claims to revenue on tuition payments from public university students and relaxing the ever-inflating prices of conventional textbooks in the process.

While companies like Blackboard and
2U started as program managers, Pearson, Wiley and other veterans bought their way into the OPM industry. At a pivotal moment of restructuring, the giants of the education industry have only expanded their influence and diversified their income streams.

**Profit incentive**

Students tend to be perceptive of possible conflicts of interest between for-profit publishers and universities. Even when questionable tuition-sharing schemes are hidden from view, fee-burdened students notice injustices.

Subbaraman, for example, is concerned by individual professors’ ability to assign unnecessary material without regard for students’ financial wellbeing.

“There have been so many times in class I’ve been told that a textbook is required and I have not even opened the textbook,” she said.

In other instances, Subbaraman had to purchase textbooks written by the professors themselves. This is a serious ethical contention: should instructors be allowed to profit off their own material in their own courses?

The University of Arizona requires instructors provide students an explanation for why they choose to assign self-authored materials, as well as disclose how much they earn from each sale. If expected profits are greater than $500 per course, instructors must work with their respective dean to minimize the conflict of interest.

ASU, on the other hand, has no such requirements. As long as the material is independently published and approved by the dean of the associated college, professors can require students purchase self-authored materials with no limitations or requirements of disclosure.

But as colleges outsource their online or hybrid-style courses to OPM providers like Pearson, the questionable exploits of a few professors may become a more marginal concern.

Ott believes professors are beginning to lose control of their curriculum autonomy in the first place. In some courses, instructors inherit standardized materials and courseware from the University — sometimes only days before classes begin.

“It’s something that professors more and more need to be aware of, but nobody tells us anything,” she said. “We’re not getting kickbacks.”

In 2019, an ASU economics professor accused the University of secretly profiting off Cengage’s MindTap software. The allegations were refuted by the University in an independent investigation, but the professor maintains that requiring the use of Cengage products is unethical.

As the conflicts of interest between universities and publishing companies are becoming larger and systemic, they are also becoming less visible to students. Unlike the interests of individual professors, the profit incentives of multinational corporations are obscured, hidden from the public eye.
The recent history of public universities is characterized by struggle between the private sector and government regulation. In 1992, the Higher Education Act was amended to eliminate the use of commission-based bonuses in college recruitment. Such legislation is intended to insulate nonprofit universities from the influence of market forces and profit incentives.

Some OPM contracts, however, bundle marketing and recruitment services with course materials and program management. ASU’s contract with Pearson places primary responsibility for marketing its managed programs on the company, not the university.

According to Ott, this is one of the most concerning conflicts of interest in higher education right now. “They’re incentivized to bring more students in and have their materials be in the courses,” Ott explained. “Whether or not that’s in students’ best interest though is not necessarily their concern.”

More students means more tuition revenue and a bigger payout for Pearson. Some contracts even mandate university admissions increase enrollment rates in their programs over time.

ASU’s 2015 Pearson contract required the minimum number of enrolled online students to nearly double from 2015-2019. If the University failed to meet the mandatory minimum, it pledged to either add new courses and programs or transfer existing ones to Pearson’s management, effectively bolstering the company’s revenue.

Profit-driven corporations are also incentivized to raise the price of tuition and cut operating costs, all in the interest of financial success. When colleges hire these companies to recruit students and manage their courses simultaneously, many begin to look at the university like less of a public utility and more of a business venture.

“Students are more and more considered to be consumers in universities, but there’s not enough transparency or enough commitment to giving them a quality product,” Ott said.

**Bottom line**

For-profit companies have historically been on the cutting edge of online education. Universities have struggled to keep up — ill-equipped to adapt to a fast-moving online marketplace, they have usually chosen to outsource digital services to online program managers.

This is part of a larger trend in public education over the past decades; as the range of services a university is expected to offer has proliferated, the number of third-party vendors integrated within universities has as well. Some point to this trend as a factor in college price inflation.

“From my standpoint, everything in higher education is expensive, but textbooks and access to learning materials is one aspect of that,” Ott said.

In the past 20 years, the price of a college tuition, fees and course materials has inflated by nearly 200%. At the same time, austerity measures in state education funding have devastated university finances.

Arizona’s defunding of education is particularly egregious. Since 2008, state spending on higher education has decreased by over 50% in Arizona, the most of any state in the country.

In an impossible bind, universities like ASU are looking to the private sector for support and collaboration. In response, policy experts are interrogating and criticizing the place of third-party services in higher education with renewed scrutiny.

Ott emphasized a need for transparency in third-party contracts and continued regulation of the for-profit education industry. She hopes Biden’s Department of Education will reimplement some of the protections rescinded by the Trump administration.

Subbaraman hypothesized that exorbitant student expenses could also serve to increase the intrinsic value of a college degree at a time when attending college has become more common. High price tags can essentially act as a socio-economic barrier to access.

“Education can have value and merit that can be realized without having to spend thousands of dollars, semester upon semester, on these textbooks,” Subbaraman said.

In the past, inflated textbook prices posed a situational and external burden on students. Today, the threat is existential, impacting the basic administrative structure and financial incentives of public institutions.

If the warnings of Ott and other policy experts hold true, students could become concerned not just about the cost of their degree but about the integrity of their university.
“Education can have value and merit that can be realized without having to spend thousands of dollars, semester upon semester, on these textbooks.”

—Bhavani Subbaraman
Once a fruitful endeavor that united the University, ASU's campus harvests have undergone massive changes

Story and photos by Savannah Dagupion

Springtime on ASU’s Tempe campus is characterized by the bright Seville sour oranges blooming overhead. Everywhere you look — a round juicy orange peers back at you. Before the oranges hit the ground, hordes of volunteers gather to harvest them all, knowing the sour oranges will return again next year as they have every year since 2008.

However, the aroma of citrus has diminished on campus.

ASU campus harvests have been putting campus-grown produce back into the food supply for decades, but in the wake of climate change, the water crisis and the pandemic, the harvests have had to adapt to change.

Deborah Thirkhill, grounds services program coordinator, is facing these issues head-on. She was hired to coordinate the first sour orange harvest over a decade ago and is the primary point of contact when it comes to cultivating, harvesting and producing.

Thirkhill said the University once had over 250 sour orange trees, which made it easy for her and the volunteers to produce the 10,000 pounds of oranges needed for cleaning and juicing at Sun Orchard Juicery.
But as the University expanded, construction continually left chopped-down trees in its wake. In August 2021, the water shortage in the Colorado River compelled the University to get rid of its orange trees.

“ASU Sustainability wants us to lower our water usage on campus and plant more native plants,” Thirkhill said.

She added that food producing plants require more water than native plants, and the campus landscape is going for a more geographically accurate look that resembles the surrounding desert landscape.

“You’re saving water, but you’ve just wiped out a unique part of ASU that can’t be replaced,” Thirkhill said. “The oil and the fragrance of those oranges are gone. ASU needs to make a decision as a community on what they want the campus to look like. You can’t have both.”

The University is heavily involved in water conservation projects like aeroponics — the process of growing plants in an air or mist environment without the use of soil — and the initiative to automate watering systems based on weather and varying evapotranspiration rates. But there are pros and cons.

“You can get a lot of food from aeroponic towers, but your plant has no contact with the soil and it’s not organic because it’s all chemical,” Thirkhill said. “But you can produce a lot of food in a small area (by shifting) the agriculture away from soil based to aeroponics. You have to decide which way you want to go.”

In Tucson, University of Arizona faced similar issues, resulting in handing the campus harvests off from their Campus Arboretum to their School of Sustainability.

Tanya Quist, director of UA’s Campus Arboretum, explained their campus harvests began with faculty members from the Arboretum wanting to save fruit from falling to the ground and going to waste.

“You have to balance the inputs and the outputs,” Quist said. “If we put energy into planting, growing, caring for and watering trees, you have to be sure that you’re getting as much of the benefits or the outputs as possible. One of those, of course, is the fruit.”

However, in 2015, the UA Campus Ar-
boretum could no longer be involved with the campus harvests. Quist said the timing wasn’t ideal for larger operational support and funding from the university.

Before 2015, UA faculty members were expected to go beyond their job descriptions and had to raise money, organize, mentor and pay student volunteers all while coordinating the campus operations.

Being an academic unit, separate from facilities management and ground services, the faculty found the resources and priorities between the two sects of the university didn’t align. The campus harvests evolved into a huge undertaking. Eventually, the inputs weren’t equalling the outputs.

“We live in a desert and … we have a very large urban population in the desert — that combination just screams at the opportunity to make sure that every drop of water, every ounce of effort that we put into building urban green spaces, is utilized for someone’s benefit,” Quist said.

She also emphasized the need to remember that trees are not wasting water; they’re recycling and recirculating it. In the meantime, trees provide an array of benefits fundamental to the health of both people and the planet.

“If you’re withdrawing more from your bank account than you’re putting in, eventually you’re not in a financially sustainable situation,” Quist said. “That’s how I think of our urban landscape.”

**Past Pollination**

There were only a handful of college gardens in ’80s and ’90s America. Around 2005, the idea of providing opportunities for students to give back to the land across American universities started growing in popularity.

ASU has been harvesting and selling dates since the ’80s to reduce the amount of waste the trees produce and distribute dates into the community.

Unlike the sour orange harvest, the date harvest is expected to continue this fall. The dates are prepared and packaged by volunteers and sold to the Tempe community.

At times when Thirkhill has excessive bags...
hundred bagels because they always provided a nice breakfast for everybody who showed up."

Tempe campus still produces a variety of fruit. Variations of dates, jujubes and the remaining oranges and peaches are casually picked when ripe. Thirkhill uses these plants as opportunities to teach her gardening class or the gardening club.

"We net the peaches to keep the birds from poking holes in them or people walking by from pulling the peaches off," she said. "When they finally ripen — which is usually around April or May — I try to get the students first pick. There’s nothing like biting into a peach and having the sweet juices flow down your chin."

Evidently, the ASU community has been able to reap what the campus harvests have sowed.

**Education and community**

Thirkhill said the connection with growing and preparing food has been lost. Her goal is to encourage people to recognize food can be in your own backyard.

“For example, there’s olive trees all over the valley — like in people’s front yards — and the olives just drop to the ground,” she said. “I’ve taught my class and the gardening club how to pick the campus olives and grind them. Then they donate it out to anybody who might need a jar of olives.”

Thirkhill highlights the importance of reclaiming personal connection with food and using produce to combat food insecurity.

Anytime she has enough produce from the harvests, she shares it with Pitchfork Pantry.

“You’re creating a culture for the next generation,” she added.

Campus harvests also serve as opportunities for ASU to garner a sense of community.

Christine Wilkinson, ASU’s senior vice president and president of the Alumni Association, said the association has been bringing in volunteers to the sour orange harvest for years. One year they brought around 140 volunteers. The Alumni Association connects ASU alumni to volunteer projects all over America, but there’s something about the campus harvests that keeps big groups of alumni coming back.

Wilkinson remembered one year, a former ASU graduate became a teacher in the West Valley and brought a busload of her students to help with the harvest. Alumni also bring their families, and as the oranges drop to the ground, children help pick them up.

Patricia Thiele-Keating, Alumni Association director, brought her girls to the harvests every year since they were toddlers. Now, her family considers them a tradition.

Even though the sour orange harvest is history, its reputation has opened doors for Thirkhill and volunteers to help save other oranges. Kaser Citrus, a commercial grove in Mesa, reached out to Thirkhill asking if
she would like to harvest Valencia oranges so they would not go to waste.

Every Saturday in March, students, alumni, staff and volunteers plan to harvest sweet oranges from the 18-acre grove. Unlike ASU’s sour oranges, food banks will take Valencias. Wilkinson said they hope to bring oranges back to ASU-sponsored food pantries.

Students can sign up for campus harvests through Changemaker Central at ASU, but in the past, Thirkhill had student volunteers from Key Club, on-campus service groups and other organizations.

A budding future

On Feb. 6, students from various religious and cultural backgrounds congregated by the Spirit horse statue in front of the W.P. Carey building to help Thirkhill.

Thirkhill needed volunteers to create pollen balls to hand-fertilize the dates, and Suzy Stone, senior Jewish educator at ASU Hillel, was looking for volunteer opportunities for students on Sundays because of Shabbat on Saturdays. The two collaborated and connected the students with the dates by explaining the significance date palms have in different cultures.

Students shook the date palm flowers off the palm and wrapped the pellet-sized flowers into a netted ball. When the flowers dry, the balls are thrown up into the date palms on Palm Walk, creating clouds of pollen to pollinate the trees.

“For myself included, I didn’t even really understand that date palms needed to be hand fertilized,” Stone said. “A lot of times we’re so removed from our food system, so that was a big inspiration for me — to help us reconnect to our food system.”

Even though the smell of citrus no longer tickles the noses of passersby, and the future of harvests aren’t looking as bright as the Seville sour oranges, campus harvests have still found a way to remain true to the environment, the community and the history of ASU.

“This was an opportunity for students to really get their hands dirty,” Stone said. “To really understand how our campus is a living and breathing campus.”
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