

# A Critical Narrative of Employee Well-Being and Control Paradox in Higher Education

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*The case presents a detailed snapshot of a staff employee well-being initiative developed and implemented by the Human Resources (HR) department in August 2014 at the Online Learning Unit (OLU) of J.M. College located in southwestern Georgia. The case is an auto-ethnographic account of how implementation of an employee quality of life (QOL) initiative combined with surveillance techniques resulted in a negative toxic culture of employee resentment, hostility, and poor performance. Using modern surveillance theories of synoptican, actor-network theory (ANT), and surveillance capitalism, the case shows how the original Foucauldian theory of panopticon has re-invented itself into a panopticon of technology dominated by a culture of capitalism and profit-maximization. The case uses pseudo names to protect privacy and maintain confidentiality of the institution and characters. The case accurately details events in a chronological manner focusing on the main character's thoughts and actions.*

## INTRODUCTION

This case uses a post-modern critical theory of surveillance as an appropriate lens to explain and study the complex topical phenomenon of implementing employee quality of life (QOL) initiatives.

*surveillance is a new form of capillary extension of disciplinary power that invest, colonize, control... nothing vanishes... surveillance is a return of the camp and the panoptic... (Crampton & Elden, 2007, p. 257)*

The issue of electronic surveillance as employed by HR in J.M College identifies as a power space that uses surveillance cameras as sources of “*panoptic technology*” and power (Koskela, 2000, p. 243). Surveillance systems of CCTV cameras and audio systems ensure that the employee is on guard and alert all the time. Building on concepts of the *synoptican* described as the authority and control of one voice over many voices; surveillance theory encompasses a fluctuating continuum of overt power and discipline to modify behavior for increased productivity and performance (Mathieson, 1997, Simon, 2004). Surveillance in HEI has extended to employee’s personal life upsetting work-life balance. Employees sacrifice personal time for office activities and get-togethers (Jackson & Mullarkey, 2000, Parker, 2003, Crampton & Elden, 2007, Chi & Lin, 2011). The theory shows how employees under constant surveillance and monitoring succumb to feelings of negativity, suspicion, and apathy. At J.M College, the feeling of being constantly watched and monitored intensified employee resentment and hostility towards the organization. The effect of continuous surveillance led to optimal efficient performance but developed a negative hostile organization climate and culture. Surveillance is thus a coercive and technological method for controlling and disciplining workers, but it is also a political process of domination where a few hold the reins of resources and positional authority seeking to dominate multiple voices in lesser positions. At J.M College, the resources and authority lay with the executive leadership i.e. the college president and the Human Resources department leading to spiraling development and prevalence of the dominant voice and marginalization of staff and faculty voices about quality of life.

Surveillance theory in HEI is a broad umbrella encompassing post-Foucauldian theories of actor-network theory (ANT) and surveillance capitalism which use constructs of the original Foucauldian theory of the panopticon, power, and discipline.

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